

On the Criticism of **STANLEY KAUFFMANN**

“Stanley Kauffmann’s sense of values stems from his panoramic awareness of the modern scene. We do more than go to the movies with him; he makes us think about the myths and realities of a culture.”—STANLEY KUNITZ

“There is an imperturbable grace about Stanley Kauffmann’s writing, a plainspoken clarity in the face of the onslaught that is the movies. He had come of age when George Bernard Shaw was considered a playwright comparable with Shakespeare, he had flourished when Bergman, Antonioni, and Fellini were the new news from Europe, and a generation and more later he was still at his post, eager to comment on whatever appeared next. His longevity was inextricably tied to his optimism—a quietly impassioned optimism about our culture that informed everything he ever wrote. That optimism is his legacy.”—JED PERL

“I can’t think of any other film critic in the world whose criticism I find more thrilling, provocative, and thought provoking. I enthusiastically recommend Stanley Kauffmann’s writing to anyone who loves to go to the movies.”—ANDRÉ GREGORY

“In his writings Stanley Kauffmann gives us a substantial aesthetic perspective, a new way to care and think about films.”—JERZY KOSINSKI

“Stanley Kauffmann’s film criticism confirms his place among the most sensitive and humane men writing about the American cultural scene.”—ROBERT BRUSTEIN

“Stanley Kauffmann was passionately engaged with film’s highest aspirations as an art form and was at his most eloquent when films were most complex. He educated generations of film-watchers and filmmakers about how and what to watch.”—NELL MINOW

“Stanley Kauffmann’s film criticism is altogether more balanced and sanguine than the work of most younger journalists.”—PHILIP FRENCH

“Stanley Kauffmann’s subtle and enthusiastic reviews could contribute to the return of cinephilia. He composes acute analyses which highlight some details that only a true movie lover can notice and appreciate.”—NICOLAS MAGENHAM

“For decades Stanley Kauffmann has brought sobriety and affectionate restraint to his reviews of films. Kauffmann has quietly gone about his work, refusing to find broad cultural significance where there is none yet willing to treat pop culture with the thoughtful dignity and calm it often deserves.”—GEORGE FETHERLING

“Kauffmann’s is a civilized, easygoing style. He is also a good judge of acting. Knowledgeableness is quietly integrated in his work, not flashily displayed. There is humane wisdom in this man’s film criticism.”—JOHN SIMON

“Stanley Kauffmann began reviewing movies for *The New Republic* decades ago and was one of the few critics remaining from the ‘Film Generation’ of the 1960s—cinephiles who believed passionately in film’s paramount status among the arts. That conviction and his informed erudition distinguish his reviews. These pieces published since 1999 are also distinctive in that most of them tackle independent and foreign films, ranging from Martin Scorsese’s, Oliver Stone’s, and Woody Allen’s at home to those of China’s Zhang Yimou and Iran’s Abbas Kiarostami abroad. This focus on the best that the medium has to offer rather than mainstream Hollywood schlock typifies Kauffmann’s respect for the art form and enhances the volume’s appeal for cineastes. At his best when dealing with a movie that rewards his devotion, Kauffmann reminds us how culturally important film once was. Now that commerce and gossip have become the preeminent content of writing about movies, Kauffmann’s quiet passion and steadfast dedication are more valuable than ever.”—GORDON FLAGG

“I never stopped reading Stanley Kauffmann, growingly appreciating his unflagging dedication, steady morale, and unclouded acuteness of perception. I kept learning from him up to the last. His very longevity carried a Shavian salutation: he had traveled down a long hallway of film and stage history and yet here he was, still fully engaged with the latest item on the docket. None of us wins immortality, but Stanley Kauffmann came nearest.”—JAMES WOLCOTT

“That Stanley Kauffmann is a first-rate movie critic is the least of it. He is unique. He is a writer of stature, and a valued presence in our culture. He has such a memory and such a mind.”—ERIC BENTLEY

“I know of no film critic who combines as many strengths as Stanley Kauffmann.”—MARTIN DUBERMAN

“Stanley Kauffmann cares, valiantly, ardently, about movies. He is—doesn’t everyone know this?—one of our national treasures.”—SUSAN SONTAG

“Any collection of Stanley Kauffmann’s film criticism shimmers in a thousand spoken and unspoken ways with his persistent, open-eyed, open-hearted, intelligent, even majestic presence. Most of what I know about integrity, excellence, and grace in the critical act was learned from Stanley Kauffmann. I am hardly alone. Any discerning reader of serious journalistic criticism of a certain age knows Kauffmann’s name and to some extent shares my admiration.”—JONATHAN KALB

“It is not a secret, but readers of Stanley Kauffmann’s reviews of film may have taken for granted, in their rush to take in the useful and profound knowledge he provides, that he is a master of the English sentence. The question is, how does this writer, Stanley Kauffmann, in his many years of devotion to criticism, ‘his art concurrent with art,’ manage to reveal so much to us about the world? He does this while being reticent or silent about matters others might display.”—STANLEY MOSS

“Stanley Kauffmann did not found a theory or make a cult out of his opinions. He had a steady and firm belief that amid so much commercial fodder the cinema could produce works of art and imaginative reach to live beside the best of the other arts. Over the years, he became a famous seeker-out of lesser known pictures, often in foreign languages, and unafraid of small, local subjects. He knew that the educated and creative eye is never impressed by size or locality. It saw aspects of the human spirit whether delivered by Nicholas Ray or Satyajit Ray, by Ingmar Bergman or Ingrid Bergman. This is not the easiest or most glamorous path for a film critic to take, especially in a culture that knows far too little about India, Eastern Europe, Iran, Cuba, or what lies beyond the Hudson River. Kauffmann was a New Yorker through and through: you could hear it in his reasonable, dry, yet edgy writing. But he was a citizen of a wider world that was opened up in his lifetime by cameras and screens. Kauffmann was born in the year in which Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916) was a daring and naïve flight of American show business. By the time he died it was clearly a condition of the world from which there was no hiding. Stanley Kauffmann was one of a great generation that urged us to look and see; to watch and try to understand.”—DAVID THOMSON

“There were noisier film critics in Stanley Kauffmann’s time, and film critics who assisted in the creation of cults around their big ideas or their big persons. Kauffmann was different. His work was strong but it was egoless. He promulgated no theory and founded no school. He revered film but he did not worship in the church of ‘cinema.’ He believed undocrinally in ‘the cinematic and the literary and theatrical and psychological and social and political,’ as befitted his diverse and welcoming temperament.

His prose infused subtlety with vitality, and all the techniques of critical devastation were at his disposal, but he never raised his voice: in his millions of words you will not find a vulgar or hectoring one. In his withering reviews there was always a tincture of melancholy that a work had fallen short. He wanted so much to admire. A work of art was innocent before proven guilty, because he was on the side of art.

His erudition was massive; all the traditions of all the theatrical arts were at his fingertips, and worn lightly and cunningly. His independence of mind through all the decades was an astonishment. He was sovereignly indifferent to the commercial promptings of the movie business, and was never content to serve as the last step in a movie’s promotion. He stayed out of the system. Even when he adored a film, he contrived to express his adoration in a way that made it useless for advertisements. He reviewed the films that he thought were important, not the films that Hollywood thought were important. He was unmoved by money and celebrity; he was a true meritocrat. His movie writing is blissfully free of knowingness, or the Manhattan disease, and free also of the high-spirited relativizing irony into which certain critics descend when they do not much like a work but do not wish to be disinvented from the party.

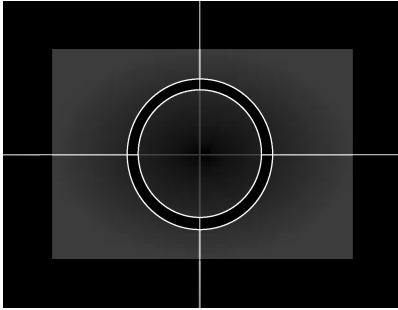
And long before globalization, he was a film globalist. He regarded the international nature of film as one of the medium’s greatest excitements. He simply wanted to see, and if possible to support, every movie in existence. He championed obscure films from obscure places, and sometimes he was mocked for his esoteric interests; but esotericism is a provincial’s pejorative, and he was perhaps the most cosmopolitan man who ever wrote about the movies.”—LEON WIESELTIER

“We are left with gratitude for Stanley Kauffmann and his career, and for his persistent—and what must have been, in his mid-nineties, heroic—fealty to the twin muses of movies and movie criticism. The extremes of other critics made his moderation seem salutary. Kauffmann stoutly resisted the declamatory; he kept his voice in the key of murmur. His role was that of the arbiter who would see a film, gauge the convulsive reactions of others, and rule ...”
—RICHARD CORLISS

“When I read Stanley Kauffmann, who became a regular weekly destination for me five years before I wrote my own first reviews, much is at stake; on important films, if we agree, I am gratified, and if we disagree, I am likely to go back to my own review and have another uneasy look at it. It’s not that I assume he is right and I am wrong; it’s that after Kauffmann disagrees, I wonder if he was perhaps more right. Simply put, Stanley Kauffmann is the most valuable film critic in America.”—ROGER EBERT

“Stanley Kauffmann knew that film could be an art form—‘Film to me is another art,’ he declared in 1962. He was the critic who wrote the best criticism about film acting: that was his special gift. Kauffmann—like all great critics—was also an educator. He guided his readers down potentially fruitful paths. But he knew they had to be responsible for their own comprehension. He could only shine light; they had to see for themselves.”—TONY MACKLIN

The World Screened



FRAMING FILM

The History & Art of Cinema

Frank Beaver, *General Editor*

Vol. 19

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The World Screened

Stanley Kauffmann on the Cinema

Edited by Bert Cardullo



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My deep gratitude goes out to the late Mr. Kauffmann and his wife, Laura, for their valuable support of and assistance on this project during the final years of their lives.



Biography of Stanley Kauffmann

Stanley Kauffmann was born in New York City on April 24, 1916, and was graduated from the College of Fine Arts of New York University in 1935. He spent ten years, from 1931 to 1941, as an actor and stage manager with the Washington Square Players and published a large number of short as well as long plays. He was also the author of nine novels, published in the United States and abroad, and two collections of memoirs; for Bantam, Ballantine, and Knopf, he worked as a book publisher's editor from 1949 to 1960. From 1967 to 1986, Kauffmann taught drama and film at Yale University; between the years 1973 and 2006, he also taught at the City University of New York, Hunter College, and Adelphi University.

Starting in 1958, Kauffmann became active in criticism. At that time he was appointed the film critic of *The New Republic*, with which magazine he was associated ever since, except for an eight-month period in 1966 when he was exclusively the theater critic of *The New York Times*. In addition to his film reviews, he wrote a large number of book reviews for *The New Republic*; from 1969 to 1979 he served as both film and theater critic for this magazine; and earlier, from 1963 to 1965, Kauffmann also served as the drama critic for the Public Broadcasting television station in New York, WNET. He continued as film critic for *The New Republic* but wrote theater criticism for the *Saturday Review* for five years, from 1979 to 1985. He contributed reviews and articles to many other journals, as well—among them

Horizon, Commentary, Salmagundi, Yale Review, Kenyon Review, Theater, and The American Scholar.

Kauffmann published eight collections of film criticism in his lifetime: *A World on Film* (1966), *Figures of Light* (1971), *Living Images* (1975), *Before My Eyes* (1980), *Field of View* (1986), *Distinguishing Features* (1994), *Regarding Film* (2001), and *Ten Great Films* (2012). He was the editor of the anthology *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to "Citizen Kane"* (1972). He also published three collections of theater criticism, *Persons of the Drama* (1976), *Theater Criticisms* (1983), and *About the Theater* (2010), together with two collections of interviews: *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann* (2003) and *Film Critic Talks: Interviews with Stanley Kauffmann, 1972–2012* (2013).

In 1974 Kauffmann was given the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism; from 1972 to 1976 he was a member of the Theater-and-Film Advisory Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts; in 1969 and 1975 he was a juror for the National Book Awards; and in 1982 he received the George Polk Award for Film Criticism as well as the Edwin Booth Award in 1986, in addition to the 1986 Birmingham Film Festival Prize for Lifetime Achievement and the 1999 Telluride Film Festival Award for Criticism. A former Ford Foundation (1964, 1971), Rockefeller (1978), Guggenheim (1979–80), Japan Foundation (1986), and New York Institute for the Humanities (1995) fellow, Kauffmann received an Emmy Award for the first-ever television series about film, which he conducted for five years in the 1960s on WNET-TV, the New York PBS station. He also received, in 1995, the Outstanding Teacher Award from the Association for Theater in Higher Education.

Pre-deceased in 2012 by his wife since 1943, Laura Cohen Kauffmann, Stanley Kauffmann died in New York City on October 9, 2013, at the age of ninety-seven.

Introduction

Man of the Movies: The Film Criticism of Stanley Kauffmann

Wolcott Gibbs, late of *The New Yorker*, once wrote the following of his experience as a film critic: “It is my indignant opinion that ninety percent of the moving pictures exhibited in America are so vulgar, witless, and dull that it is preposterous to write about them in any publication not intended to be read while chewing gum.”¹ Gibbs vowed that he would never review another movie, and he kept his promise.

As it happens, he quit movie reviewing just before the discovery that there was a market for European films in the United States. It was the 1946 box-office triumph in New York of Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City* that opened the way for many low-budget Italian and French pictures. Even better ones began coming to America, from Asia as well as Europe, after the 1950 success of Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*. These foreign films increasingly exposed the tinsel and cardboard of the indigenous product, but—more to the present point—they made the reviewing of movies a rewarding activity.

Stanley Kauffmann’s career as a film critic for *The New Republic* began not long afterward, in February of 1958—decades before the advent of simplified thumbs-up, thumbs-down reviewing popularized by television commentators like Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. Significantly, this was also the year in which *Agee on Film* was published (and reviewed by Kauffmann in *The New Republic*, as well as reprinted in this volume), and thus a year that marks the beginning of a change in general attitudes toward serious film criticism in the United States. Indeed, the

1960s and early 1970s were heady times for such criticism. Films, then, were being talked about in terms of art, and the central document of the time describing the general conversation was written in 1966 by Stanley Kauffmann and published in his very first collection of film criticism, *A World on Film* (also from 1966): it was titled “The Film Generation.” “There exists a Film Generation,” Kauffmann opined, “the first generation that has matured in a culture in which the film has been of accepted serious relevance, however that seriousness is defined.”² Kauffmann’s directly stated and cleanly structured essay was written in his characteristically precise, quietly professional style. Looking optimistically toward the future, “The Film Generation” supplied historical context and reasonable definition for the burgeoning American film culture.

In colleges and universities, in cafés, bars, theater lobbies, and their surrounding sidewalks, movies were then becoming the subject of heated debates. Neither moviegoing nor movie reviewing was new, as Kauffmann’s own *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to “Citizen Kane”* (1972) proved. But youthful hordes, uncomfortable with literature and not yet enslaved by television, now found something to get excited about in the cinema. More than ever before and perhaps ever since, they looked to critics to stimulate, shape, or confirm their opinions, and they gravitated toward the critics who best satisfied their individual bents.

The word “critics” refers to journalistic ones (as opposed to newspaper reviewers), not academics or scholars. It was the former group that led the fight to give film stature as art, and by the first few years of the 1970s this battle had been won. Virtually every college and university in America by then was offering film courses, and many had degree programs or were in the process of developing them. Yet with every new course, program, and treatise, ironically, the less relevant the writing of the pioneering journalistic critics became to the professors. Was this a case of film education outdistancing the journalists, whose establishment had advanced middle age or beyond, and who had therefore ceased to grow intellectually? Or had the demand to achieve academic respectability killed off the love of movies in those film scholars, who, once drawn to motion pictures out of passion, were now burying them in mounds of hopelessly “scientific,” theoretical verbiage?

The split between the academics or scholars and the journalistic critics can best be understood in terms of classical and romantic temperaments: one deductive, starting with general principles and moving to specific examples, the other inductive, relying on each “text” to stimulate insights appropriate to it. And because of the strong French influence on academic thinking about film, it was unlikely then, in the mid-1970s, just as it is now, that American journalistic critics would adopt any of the academy’s viewpoints. For those viewpoints go against a longstanding American tradition. Leslie Fiedler put this issue best when he said something to

the effect that no matter what they try to do, the French keep reinventing neoclassicism while the Americans keep reinventing romanticism.

Stanley Kauffmann himself once said something similar in a 1992 interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*: “The academic critics think of me as an impressionist, because I ... deal experientially with film, deal with it analytically in terms of a highly personal set of ineffable standards. That is, I could not possibly codify for you what my beliefs are about film; it’s a matter of instances rather than precepts.”³ For Kauffmann, the most fundamental quality of film criticism was not the code or theory behind it, but its moral rigor—its commitment to the art of film, passion to see it improve and be taken as seriously as any fine art, and disregard for any kind of popularity. It seems, then, that for the foreseeable future (and that future may be brief given the surfeit of Internet “chat” about the cinema) journalistic criticism of this kind will be at odds with academic film study. But the journalists still need to be read, especially in universities, if only to keep alive the romantic enthusiasm that brought professors to the cinema in the first place.

Where does Stanley Kauffmann stand among the journalistic critics? Though precise terminology is elusive, there were, at the time he became prominent, two kinds of critics: the “eggheads,” who preferred what were loosely called art films, and the populists, who “grooved” on Hollywood movies and their foreign counterparts where they could find them. The eggheads were Stanley Kauffmann, Dwight Macdonald, Vernon Young, and John Simon, with relatively few adherents. The populists were Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, and Manny Farber, with their legions of followers. In between, and antecedent to both groups, were good souls like James Agee, Robert Warshaw, and Otis Ferguson (all three of whom died prematurely, perhaps to the enhancement of their already deserved reputations).

Of the egghead critics, Kauffmann was the least dogmatic and the least elitist, though he was accused by his detractors of being too “distant,” “professorial,” or “dispassionate”—too impersonal in his reviews, according to the crusading Kael, to make others want to see the movies he liked. (Would an “impersonal” critic have forgiven many sins in otherwise negligible films, as Kauffmann often did, as long as they had a progressive social message?) Nonetheless, for over fifty years, Stanley Kauffmann wrote about film in *The New Republic* and elsewhere. And since 1967, he had also been teaching film as well as theater and critical writing at the Yale School of Drama, Hunter College, the City University of New York Graduate Center, and beyond. Kauffmann’s own critical style is civilized and easygoing, not chattily egocentric like Kael’s, coltishly soul-baring like Sarris’s, or Olympianly ironic like Macdonald’s. He was a man at home in film history, conversant with culture and the arts generally, informative without being preachy, using his writing to think about his subject and pleased to take us into his confidence.

The internal consistency of Kauffmann's evaluations makes clear that he says what he thinks, though his insights are neither gratuitously shocking nor necessarily innovative, and he does not make a show of himself or battle insistently on behalf of his own reputation. Here, then, was a critic who took films more seriously than he took himself. His stance was anything but a commonplace one among his fellow critics. Indeed, much film criticism still seems to be written by persons who love nothing more than their own persona, or know no other art form. As Kauffmann himself put the matter in a 1965 essay (reprinted in *The World Screened*) on Pauline Kael in *Harper's Magazine*, he pledged allegiance to "a view of the film as a descendant of the theater and literature, certainly *sui generis* but not without ancestors or cousins, to be judged by its own unique standards, which are yet analogous to those of other arts: a view that is pluralistic, aesthetic but not anti-science, contemporary but not unhistorical, and humanistic."⁴ Stanley Kauffmann, then, was a man of large interests, great knowledge, and supreme responsibility.

A particular value of his work was his willingness to go against critical consensus. Kauffmann was never intimidated, for example, by precious, arty analyses and endorsements of films that included the French cachet (from *Cahiers du cinéma*) among their number. Nor was he ever overawed by films that won their fame because of their "difficulty," or because they claimed to be "advanced." Just because a film was labeled *nouvelle vague*, or New Wave, and was made by Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Philippe de Broca, Agnès Varda, even Jean Cocteau or Robert Bresson, Kauffmann did not cast aside his obligations as a critic to take on the mantle of a cineaste. No matter how big or idolized the director, Kauffmann always strove to separate brouhaha from artistry.

Witness his disliking of *The Serpent's Egg* (1978) despite the fact that he was an Ingmar Bergman fan; his not hesitating to explain why *Perceval* (1978) fails even though he was otherwise an admirer of Eric Rohmer; or, in a *Salmagundi* interview from 1991 (included in *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*), his extended critique of the urbane realism of an otherwise overrated Woody Allen. Witness also the following comeuppances Kauffmann delivered to Luis Buñuel in *A World on Film* in a review of *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955): "He is a master technician with the outlook of a collegiate idealist who has just discovered venality and lust." ... "Buñuel, the swami of sadism, has now reached the point of self-parody." ... "Buñuel remains, for me, a highly resourceful technician and a highly neurotic adolescent."⁵ Buñuel may have been too old and too far-gone for change by this time (1966), but these harsh words surely gave some "Buñuel-can-do-no-wrong" devotees a prod toward reevaluating their master.

All the pieces on Buñuel in *A World on Film* are grouped together, which is not as trivial an editorial choice as it may sound. Rather, it is symptomatic of

Kauffmann's longtime concern with continuity—one that continued up to his last book, *Ten Great Films* (2012). When, in *Before My Eyes* (1980), you read his review of *Family Plot* (1976), you also register the important point that, for all the encomia about Alfred Hitchcock's style, a Hitchcock film has always stood or stumbled by virtue of its script. An extended essay in the same volume on *8½* (1963) discusses not just that film but also its relation to Federico Fellini's life and its place in the cinematic pantheon as well as the artistic pantheon generally. Writing on the much-awarded *Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978), Kauffmann once again swims against the critical tide by asserting that it is far from top-drawer Ermanno Olmi, and proceeds to explain why by citing much earlier, better films by this director like *Il Posto* (1961) and *The Fiancés* (1963).

No qualifications of such value judgments on Stanley Kauffmann's part are necessary because, in unabashedly, rigorously, thoughtfully, and humanely deploying those principles of value and judgment, he always reached conclusions that were conditional. Responding, for instance, to Susan Sontag's contention, in her famous essay on Godard (from the 1969 book *Styles of Radical Will*), that "just as no absolute, immanent standards can be discovered for determining the composition, duration, and placement of a shot, there can be no truly sound reason for excluding anything from a film,"⁶ Kauffmann wrote the following in *Figures of Light* (1971):

This seemingly staggering statement is only the extreme extension of a thesis that any enlightened person would support: there are no absolutes in art. The Godardians take this to mean (like Ivan Karamazov) that therefore everything is permissible. Others of us take it to mean that therefore standards have to be empirically searched out and continually readjusted, to distinguish art from autism; that, just as responsive morals have to be found without a divine authority if humanity is to survive, so responsive aesthetics have to be found without canonical standards if art is to survive.⁷

Some, in reading Kauffmann's conflation of aesthetic and moral standards above, may choose to see the finger-wagging or millennial doomsaying of a self-appointed cultural gatekeeper. Yet such a conflation is not just an essential tenet for anyone engaged in criticism: it is in addition a sign of the genuine ardor, and the true seriousness (shorn of any sweater-vest insinuations), that Stanley Kauffmann brought to bear in his own writing.

As should anyone who is deeply serious about art, Kauffmann took failings in it as they should be taken: that is, personally. "Fine artists make us feel proprietary about them," he wrote in *Before My Eyes*, apropos of Antonioni's 1975 film *The Passenger*: "They invade us so strongly, become so much a part of the way we look outward and inward, that we can't approach new works of theirs without a sense

that we are intimately involved.”⁸ Kauffmann’s aesthetic high-mindedness was of the healthiest variety imaginable, born neither of easy cynicism nor of unthinking adherence to traditional (i.e., fabricated) canonical standards—whose existence, in any salutarily tangible sense, he dismissed as casually as the Almighty’s. Such high-minded thinking was premised on a profound disdain of glibness, of posturing, of pretense and laziness and arbitrariness, qualities that are disagreeable enough in other spheres of existence but positively despicable in (what should be) the heightened and heightening realm of art. (The divination of artistic purpose, purpose both worthy and realized, was another of Kauffmann’s perennially unfashionable dedications.)

Already during his first full decade as a film critic, Kauffmann had become one of the profession’s most admired writers for the directness of his spare prose. He wasted little time in getting to the point. For this reason, *A World on Film* remains one of the best of collections of his movie reviews, even if it was the first. Writing about an Irvin Kershner picture, for example, Kauffmann opened with the following sentence: “*The Luck of Ginger Coffey* [1964] ... is the sort of work that is vastly overpraised simply because it is not phony.”⁹ The first sentence of Kauffmann’s review of *L’Avventura* (1960) is itself short, simple, and resoundingly dramatic: “At last.”¹⁰ Furthermore, compare the heart- and loin-throbbing double-entendre titles of Pauline Kael’s collections of film criticism (*I Lost It at the Movies*, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, *Going Steady*, *Deeper into Movies*, *When the Lights Go Down*, *Taking It All In*) with the sober, scrutinizing, ocular-based metaphors of Kauffmann’s: *Figures of Light*, *Living Images*, *Before My Eyes*, *Field of View*, *Distinguishing Features*, and finally, simply, *Regarding Film*.)

Apart from the economy of his writing style, breadth of range is another Kauffmann virtue, abundantly on display in *Before My Eyes*. What other critic would begin a review of Robert Altman’s *A Wedding* (1978), as Kauffmann does in this book, by relating the film to latter-day European naturalism; in another piece, compare Bergman to Eugene O’Neill; or, in another review, detail the ways in which young German filmmakers of the 1970s utilized American popular culture? Who other than Kauffmann would lay out Lina Wertmüller’s options for portraying the Holocaust in *Seven Beauties* (1976) ... and then explain why she decided on comedy; or indicate his perceptiveness of the pleasures, and occasional profundities, of pop by calling *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) not simply the best science-fiction movie ever made but “an event in the history of faith”?¹¹ Who else among the critics would notice—as Kauffmann does in *Regarding Film*—in Warren Beatty’s *Bulworth* (1998) an unacknowledged debt not only to Frank Capra’s *Meet John Doe* (1941) but also to a Finnish film and a Ukrainian one; reveal his astute appreciation of the old Hollywood masters by arguing that to place John Ford “among the great

directors of the world, as we must, is to see that the ‘pure force of genius’ is relatively stronger in Ford than in Dickens because Ford had much less freedom of choice and much less control over the finished form of his work”;¹² or discuss, during a single conversation (with Studs Terkel in 1985, included in *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*) about the theater, the subjects of Harold Pinter and acting, Samuel Beckett and Bert Lahr, and Bertolt Brecht and Berlin?

From the perspective of his more than five decades as a critic, nearly four decades as a teacher, and a number of years in-between as an editor, playwright, and novelist, Stanley Kauffmann clearly continued to see films in a broad cultural and historical context that eludes the tunnel-vision reviewers whose only reference points are Hollywood, old movies, and the box office. He was particularly sensitive to the parasitic relationship that middlebrow movies too often have with genuine art. “He’s the film equivalent of the advertising-agency art director who haunts the galleries to keep his eye fresh,” Kauffmann wrote of Robert Altman in *Before My Eyes*. “The future may judge our age culturally by its high estimate of Altman. Indeed, the nonsense about him is already coming undone.”¹³

Reviewing Kauffmann’s *Living Images* (1975) a number of years ago, one reviewer suggested that his most salient quality as a critic was that of “raffish dignity.”¹⁴ His raffishness was more wry than pronounced, however, as in the following humorous comment about George Stevens’ *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), from *A World on Film*: “Sometimes I am more relieved than at other times that I am not a Christian; these occasions include the experience of most films about Jesus.”¹⁵ Kauffmann’s raffishness remained as lively as ever, as in the following understatedly but effectively witty comment about *Fargo* (1996), from *Regarding Film* (2001): “The hot news about Joel and Ethan Coen is that they have made a tolerable film.”¹⁶ Or, from the same collection, these slicing words about *Touch of Evil*: “[Charlton] Heston’s attempts to be a dashing young man were painful even when he was young.”¹⁷ Often Kauffmann’s opening lines are as amusingly provocative as Pauline Kael’s. Witness the following three from *Before My Eyes*: “When François Truffaut has an idea, he makes a film. And sometimes when he doesn’t have an idea, he makes a film anyway.”¹⁸ ... “Paddy Chayefsky is the kind of writer who is not an obvious escape-monger or fabricator but a venturer who takes his audience on an interesting tour of anguish and then delivers everyone safely right back to his front door.”¹⁹ ... “One way to pass the time while watching a turkey with big people in it is to wonder why they agreed to do it.”²⁰

Sometimes, however, Kauffmann’s amusing provocativeness or dignified raffishness turns to harsh dismissal. This may be the result of an impatience with stars or directors who keep flourishing despite his low opinion of them, but, from the mid-1970s on, Kauffmann seemed less willing to be gentlemanly. Thus, in *Before*

My Eyes, he saw his bugbear Robert Altman as “a walking death sentence on the prospects of American film” and a “public embarrassment,” the director’s *Quintet* (1979) “paralyzingly stupid.”²¹ *Shampoo* (1975) struck Kauffmann in the same volume as “disgusting,”²² while Liza Minnelli in *New York, New York* (1977) resembled a “giant rodent en route to a costume ball.”²³ Perhaps for a critic so concerned with film’s relationship to larger culture, the many opportunities lost, bungled, or cheapened had come to seem unbearable after years of reviewing.

Even so, as early as 1959, Kauffmann was able to toss off this line in dismissal of Gregory Peck: “He embodies Gordon Craig’s ideal of an actor: an *Übermarionette*, wooden to the core.”²⁴ Only two years later—in the same collection of criticism—he had this to say about the performance of Jackie Gleason in *The Hustler*: “It is the best use of a manikin by a director since Elia Kazan photographed Burl Ives as Big Daddy”²⁵ in 1958’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. And, in 1963, in an interview published by the magazine *Seventh Art*, Kauffmann dismissed *la politique des auteurs*, or the *auteur* theory of film (which holds that the director is the primary “author” of any motion picture), with the following words: “I think it is utterly boring ... it’s for irresponsible children. It bores me even to say as much as I’ve said.”²⁶

Whether harsh or generous, Stanley Kauffmann was most certainly a master of the felicitous phrase and memorable characterization. So, in *Regarding Film*, he describes Emma Thompson as the “first film actress since Katharine Hepburn to make intelligence sexy”;²⁷ he finds in *Amistad* (1997) a sense of “presence in the past”²⁸ he has not experienced since Bergman’s *Virgin Spring* (1960); and he notes that Oliver Stone “in appalling measure”²⁹ succeeds in *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Kauffmann is acute about a lesser but related film, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which “nourishes, abets, cultural slumming [with] calculated grunginess.”³⁰ And, ever sensitive to cinematography, he writes of *Stalingrad* (1993) that “the colors don’t glamorize, they confirm,”³¹ while in the camerawork of *Sister, My Sister* (1994) he finds “the everyday put before us as evidence of strangeness.”³² In *Carrington* (1995), for its part, “appurtenances of class and of conscious bohemianism are integral to the characters themselves, not imposed as décor. Settings and story are unified.”³³

As they were not, for instance, in *Barry Lyndon* (1975). At a time—the last quarter of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first—when gorgeous cinematography had all but overwhelmed intelligent screenwriting, Kauffmann’s senses never overpowered his sensibility. Of *Barry Lyndon*, whose visual splendor blinded many critics to its intellectual emptiness, he wrote in *Before My Eyes*: “Stanley Kubrick began professional life as a photographer and has lately been reverting to his first career. His new film very nearly accommodates Zeno’s paradox of motion: it seems to remain in one place while actually it is moving ahead. Kubrick has produced three hours and four minutes of pictures.”³⁴ Unlike

auteurists and other aesthetes, then, Kauffmann understood that films begin where most reviews don't: the screenplay. And he reiterated his belief when he wrote the following in praise of *Charley Varrick* (1973) in *Living Images*: "It was directed by Don Siegel, a great favorite of the *auteur* critics, and it proves yet again that there's nothing wrong with an *auteur* director that a good script [by Howard Rodman and Dean Riesner, as adapted from John Reese's novel *The Looters*] can't cure."³⁵

None of the above is to say that Stanley Kauffmann was the kind of film critic who could easily be dismissed as "literary." For example, Kauffmann's ability to engage with non-narrative work that, in his eyes, thoroughly justifies its breaking of conventional cinematic modes through the validity of its artistic purpose, as well as the breadth of its intellectual and technical resources, is evidenced by his piece on Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Our Hitler* (1977), included in *Field of View* (1986). Moreover, Kauffmann reserves his greatest scorn for conventional screenwriters whose own prose never equals their literary aspirations, deftly puncturing the pretensions of, among others, James Toback (*The Gambler*, 1974) and Thomas McGuane (*The Missouri Breaks*, 1976). Kauffmann is also mercilessly attentive to the sort of detail that is usually overlooked in hyperbolic reviews. Reviewing *The Godfather, Part II* in 1975, for example, he patiently noted four gigantic plot holes before adding casually, "And, by the way, the ship on which young Vito is said to be arriving in New York from Sicily is actually leaving New York, sailing south past the Statue of Liberty."³⁶

One of the subconscious advantages of being a critic on a "little" magazine like *The New Republic* may be that one feels sufficiently free to tout small films, or neglected art, in addition to covering major releases like the first part of *The Godfather* (1972). Kauffmann always showed this predilection for unheralded work, perhaps never more strongly than in *Before My Eyes*. There Elaine May's barely acknowledged *Mikey and Nicky* (1976) is praised as "an implicitly large film" and "an odd, biting, grinning, sideways-scuttling rodent of a picture"³⁷ that is the best film by an American woman to date. *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), to Kauffmann's eyes, is the finest film about Vietnam, far above *Coming Home* (released in the same year)—a point that he expands upon during his 1992 interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*³⁸ with reference to *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). The flaws in *Go Tell the Spartans* are pointed out, to be sure, but so are the wider accomplishments. And so is the acting.

Among Kauffmann's major distinctions from other film critics was a preoccupation with actors. Having been a stage actor himself, he was sensitive to performers while other film critics treated them tangentially, if at all—even if they were icons on the order of Cary Grant or Marilyn Monroe, who had the screen power to shape the force and nature of their films. Kauffmann was the antithesis

of those critics who believed that “serious” film criticism had everything to do with theory, genre, politics, *auteurism*, or other theme-couching considerations, and very little to do with the acting leads whom they parenthetically deigned to cite. To word-shoveling spiritual rhapsodists like Pauline Kael and Parker Tyler, then, Burt Lancaster up there on the screen might as well have been Arnold Stang. Even someone normally as judicious as Vernon Young could mindlessly argue that “film criticism can usually afford to disregard actors in a film’s total effect, unless they are grossly bad or overwhelmingly good.”³⁹

As evidence of Stanley Kauffmann’s keen interest in screen acting, let’s have a look at this critic on the acting of Jane Fonda—someone whose career he had watched from the beginning. He keenly locates the mediocrity of *Coming Home* as the source of Fonda’s “crimped” performance: “Her performance seems crimped by the role’s careful sterilization. There’s nothing much more than Jane Wyman pertness at the start, to which is later added some Elissa Landi soul. I choose ’30s references because, under the ’68 trappings, a perennial movie-movie is what *Coming Home* is.”⁴⁰ Such a comment is typical of Kauffmann’s criticism and serves as evidence, together with the following nuggets, that he was the only American film critic who had a thorough, incisive appreciation of the performance side of cinema.

From *A World on Film*, sample these remarks comparing Frank Sinatra with Marlon Brando: “The emotion displayed by Sinatra, one feels, is always Sinatra’s emotion, not the character’s. . . . If it were possible to see Sinatra in Brando’s role in *On the Waterfront* [1954], that would clarify the difference between mere simulation and creative acting.”⁴¹ In praise of Brenda de Banzie’s performance in *The Entertainer* (1960), Kauffmann acerbically wrote, in the same volume, “Her drunk scene is one to which all Studio actors should be taken and held fast by the nape the neck until they have seen it a dozen times.”⁴² And about Ralph Richardson’s performance as the faded matinee idol James Tyrone in Sidney Lumet’s film of Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1962), Kauffmann was not afraid to be stingy, even to a time-honored great, when he wrote in *A World on Film* that the actor “provides a sound performance, instead of the affected distortion that he often palms off as originality. One cannot quite believe that his face ever set feminine hearts aflutter or that he is more than occasionally Irish (when he remembers the brogue); but he drives hard and honestly for the center of this warped, grandiloquent man.”⁴³

Nor was Kauffmann afraid to praise a performance that other reviewers had damned. In his critique of John Frankenheimer’s film version of O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* (1973), from *Living Images*, he lauded the acting of Lee Marvin, whose portrayal of Hickey, many other critics felt, had let the production down—especially in comparison to Jason Robards’ legendary stage rendition of

this major character. “And to crown the work there is Lee Marvin, as Hickey, the salesman-apostle,” Kauffmann wrote:

To put it simply: Marvin was born to play Hickey. He has the perfect understanding of the man and perfect equipment to deal with it. ... Marvin understands the bumps and sags, and he lifts it all adroitly with gesture, with vaudevillian’s esprit, to present both the man who was and who is. Then comes the payoff, the great last act. Marvin is wonderful. I have seen James Barton, the first Hickey, and Jason Robards (along with others), and though they were both unforgettably good, Marvin goes past them—so powerfully that he makes the crux of the play clearer than I have ever found it before, on stage or page.⁴⁴

Let us now consider Stanley Kauffmann on the creative acting of Paul Newman—a performer who appeared alongside Lee Marvin in *Pocket Money* (1972), and whose work Kauffmann had early celebrated, in *A World on Film*, in a dual review of Robert Rossen’s *The Hustler* (1961) and Martin Ritt’s *Paris Blues* (1961). The following passage comes from an interview with Kauffmann that appeared in *Film Heritage* in the fall of 1972:

Paul Newman is much more subtle than he’s given credit for being. ... If I could take clips from *Sometimes a Great Notion* [1971] and *Pocket Money* and show them to you side by side, figuratively, I think I could demonstrate what I mean about subtlety of imagination working its way out through vocal inflection, physical attitudes, personality aura, and all the other factors that go towards subtle delineation. Newman ... *thinks* differently in his pictures. It’s not a question of a stock company actor putting on hook nose and beard and becoming “somebody else,” a man of a thousand faces or anything like that—that’s easy. Newman works from a core outward, differently. And you would find, I believe, that his whole system of timing was different in *Pocket Money* from what it was in the logging picture, *Sometimes a Great Notion*.⁴⁵

Lastly in the acting department, consider this analysis, from *Regarding Film*, of the two stars who have played Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (1962, 1997): “James Mason is the ideal Humbert. He gives us a doomed man, conscious of it, accepting it. ... [Jeremy] Irons in the role [gives] it his customary vestments of intelligence and sensitive reticence, but at his deepest he is no more than melancholy. Mason suggested a tragic fall.”⁴⁶ As for the difference between a comic performer and a comic actor, Kauffmann replies in *A World on Film*: “A performer is a person who does things to make you laugh; an actor creates a character at whose actions and utterances you laugh.”⁴⁷ To Kauffmann, Peter Ustinov and Peter Sellers were comic performers; Alec Guinness and Jack Lemmon were comic actors. Of the “comic” Lemmon, Kauffmann went on presciently to say the following—also from

A World on Film—about his performance in Billy Wilder’s *The Apartment* (1960): “Jack Lemmon is the kind of problem American films need. He is a vigorous, highly talented, and technically equipped actor with a wide emotional range. Can Hollywood supply him with material that is good enough for him?”⁴⁸

Probably most important in any consideration of Stanley Kauffmann’s critical virtues is that, while many of his fellow reviewers were carried away on their own waves of rhetorical bluster, or blurby hyperbole, during the last few decades of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first—particularly in their indiscriminating remarks about film acting—he did not forget the real duty or responsibility of a critic. Which is to exercise his judgment in the service of art, not to try desperately to substitute rhetorical fireworks for the experience of art, or to attempt to create masterpieces by fiat rather than discover them by careful observation. To be sure, Kauffmann was not afraid to generalize from his detailed observations, though he was always careful to avoid the thesis-mongering that too often passes these days for cultural criticism.

For his part, he avoided such axe-grinding. Letting his aesthetics flow into his morality, without dichotomy, Kauffmann thus explored movies in order to search out the universality of their subject matter, the artistry of their technique, and the ethical force that makes some art objects greater than others. He wonderfully does all three in a review of that difficult yet impressive film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), where, neither blinded by its technique nor alienated by its innovation, he could lucidly and sympathetically locate its artistic impulse at the same time as he had to conclude, “After *Marienbad*, I knew more about Alain Resnais and Resnais’s search for reality; but after Antonioni’s *La Notte* [1961] and *L’Avventura* I knew more about myself.”⁴⁹

Kauffmann’s description of Harry Alan Potamkin, in a thoughtful appreciation of the late Marxist critic, could equally apply to himself: “He judged film by its own criteria, certainly ... but criteria no more lax or unbuttoned than those that any good critic would apply to any other art.” Unfortunately, as Kauffmann noted in this piece from *Before My Eyes*, “The assumption, then and now, is that such an approach precludes appreciation of good popular film. Or that such an approach marks the ‘literary’ film critic.”⁵⁰ Perhaps this was too sour a view of the cinematic landscape in the late 1970s. But it is none too sour a view from the vantage point of 2016. If anyone is beleaguered these days, it is critics with taste and intelligence—like the late Stanley Kauffmann—who bring to their work a *littérateur’s* perspective on narrative structure and character development, who use their cultural appetite to make thematic connections between movies (the most populist art form) and literature, and who, pedagogically speaking, focus less on the sociological or political implications of a film than on the quality of its artistic expression.

Still, Kauffmann felt considerably less beleaguered than most of his fellow film critics; and, as he pointed out in his interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, “The serious critic ... who can’t enjoy what to him is an entertainment film, is lacking in full capacity for enjoying the best film, I think.”⁵¹ As Kauffmann himself would have agreed, the fact that a Japanese film by Yasujiro Ozu does not run very long in America’s biggest city doesn’t prove any more about the status of the art and its audience than the fact that Athol Fugard’s drama *Boesman and Lena* (1969) didn’t break the attendance record set by *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), or that John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* (1964) did not outsell the pop poetry of Rod McKuen. It is not so much that Kauffmann was sanguine about the state of the cinema at any particular time; rather, he knew that masterpieces in any form in any age are few and far between, and that a responsible critic must exercise the same judgment in the valleys as on the peaks. In the meantime, he was hardly waiting around for the next great work of art to appear, or for an old master miraculously to regain his powers.

Indeed, Kauffmann’s powers of discernment are perhaps most evident in his writing about films that were far from being total successes; he is capable of simultaneously appreciating their virtues (often limited) and deploring their shortcomings (often considerable). “*Julia* is irresistible,” he confessed in 1977. “Tears must flow. Mine certainly did. But this is not to say that it’s really good. In fact, if it were *really* good, tears might flow less, perhaps not at all. *Julia* is first-class middlebrow beautified filmmaking.”⁵² Or consider, from 1978, this vintage-Kauffmann criticism of Terrence Malick’s *Days of Heaven*:

He brought over Nestor Almendros for this film and has proved, by doing this, the last thing he wanted to prove: there is no such thing as an artist-cinematographer; there are only good cinematographers who sometimes work for artists. And when the director is weak, as Malick is here, he tends to lean more and more on the good cinematographer’s ability, and so swamps the film in pretty pictures.⁵³

In the end, Stanley Kauffmann’s film writing creates the kind of evocative and sensitive critical world that recharges a work of art while searching out and probing its parts. He does not merely mediate between his readers and the artwork; he allows the play of his intelligence to respond to the force of that work, using language to capture the thrust of a film and test it against its own possibilities. At his best, Kauffmann responds to the cinema, in Henry James’s phrase, with “perception at the pitch of passion.”⁵⁴ Agreement with him matters less than recognition of his ability to summon up the memory of films enjoyed; to evoke the pleasure of, and build up appetite for, films unseen; and, on privileged occasions, to change our long-held but nonetheless obsolete critical estimates, or to make us reflect for the first time on the magic of being born at a time when the arrival of film could

transform one's life. Without the movies, writes Kauffmann in *Regarding Film*, "Josef von Sternberg might have spent his life in the lace business; Howard Hawks might have remained an engineer ... [David] Lean might have browned out his life as a London accountant."⁵⁵ So too did Stanley Kauffmann discover film criticism, and apply himself to it, at precisely the right time.

The right time, the late 1950s and early 1960s, was also when Kauffmann became one of the first film critics to use television as a means of consistently investigating film culture, as he brought an erudite brand of criticism to the public airwaves. Stanley Kauffmann was the host of "The Art of Film" on the old WNDT-TV, based in Newark, New Jersey, from 1963 to 1967. (WNDT merged with the National Educational Television [NET] in 1970, when the Public Broadcasting Service was formed, and became PBS's New York affiliate, WNET-TV, Channel 13.) On this program—which in 1964 won a local New York-area Emmy Award for general excellence—he conducted serious discussions regarding the techniques and artistry of filmmaking with guests who included directors and screenwriters like Michelangelo Antonioni and Harold Pinter, as well as producers and actors. Film clips were interspersed to illustrate points in a documentary-like manner, rather than being used as they mostly were in later years: as free advertising by studios trying to plug their newest releases. As much as his reviews in *The New Republic* and the books that anthologized them, "The Art of Film" thus helped to establish Kauffmann's reputation as a critic of perception and power.

As if his television commentary and print reviewing of film were not enough, Stanley Kauffmann was even a frontline drama critic for a time, starting in the 1960s, for *The New York Times* and *Saturday Review* among other publications. (Indeed, from 1963 to 1965, he served as both the drama and film critic for the public television station in Newark, WNDT.) He stopped writing regular theater criticism in 1985 but continued to write film criticism until his death in 2013. And the present volume, *The World Screened: Stanley Kauffmann on the Cinema*, contains a selection of that film criticism—arranged chronologically, by section, from the earliest piece to the latest—written during five decades of his journalistic career. These articles and reviews were selected from the period 1958–2007 on the basis of their international as well as national (American) representativeness, and with the idea in mind of creating a balance between prominent film directors and directors less prominent or relatively early in their careers.

Included in *The World Screened*, then, are reviews of such notable fiction features (at the time of their initial American release) as Federico Fellini's *Variety Lights*, Satyajit Ray's *The World of Apu*, Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*, Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*,

and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*; reconsiderations of such classic films as Charles Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris*, Luis Buñuel's *L'Âge d'Or*, Fritz Lang's *M*, and David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*; evaluative records of important documentaries like Frédéric Rossif's *To Die in Madrid*, Peter Davis's *Hearts and Minds*, and Michael Moore's *Roger & Me*; remembrances of late, distinguished film artists such as Jean Renoir and Federico Fellini; reviews of books by Pauline Kael, Ingmar Bergman, and Michael Caine; and ruminations on such important subjects as screenwriting, film preservation, film criticism, and the *auteur* theory.

In *The World Screened*, as in his previous collections, Kauffmann regularly comments on the nature, as well as what can be called (with the advent of the Internet) the crisis, of film criticism, as he does on such subjects as the function of criticism, the qualifications of a critic, the influence or power of critics, newspaper reviewing versus magazine criticism versus academic scholarship, and critical theory as opposed to critical practice. Other topics routinely touched on in Kauffmann's work include the relationship between theater and film, particularly the difference between stage and screen acting; children and the cinema and the phenomenon of child actors; the relationship between novels and the movies made from them; Shakespeare and the cinema; sex and sexuality as well as realism, taste, and violence in film; the pleasures, and treasures, of documentary film; various national cinemas (among them those of Argentina, Burkina Faso, and Finland); the extent to which cinema seems embedded in French culture more than in any other; the phenomenon of film festivals; the persistence of American independent filmmakers in the face of the commercial behemoth of Hollywood; the ostensible "death of film" in the age of digital cinema; and the issue of government subsidy for the cinema in particular and for the arts in general.

Let me conclude by mentioning a long, lovely piece that Stanley Kauffmann wrote in tribute to (the still-living) John Gielgud in 1977 (and included in *Before My Eyes*), in which he took issue with Brecht's admonition in his play *Life of Galileo* (1938–47) that "Unhappy is the land that needs a hero."⁵⁶ "Unknown is the land that needs no hero. Unknown is the interior land that needs no hero," Kauffmann retorts:

Brecht's line becomes even more doubtful when we see that what we have chiefly left to cheer us, in the whirl and disorder of our days, are some heroes, heroines: not mouthers of ideals but practitioners of excellence, men and women who have made personal worlds in which the centers hold. They help us. And excellence that gives us a model, however distantly analogous to our lives, is a testament of possibility. Art is still one locus of such excellence, whichever art it is that speaks to you most directly.⁵⁷

Beyond the exquisite, carefully chosen phrasing whose ease belies its exceedingly precise construction, beyond the unerring sense of rhythm and cadence that

punctuates a luxuriously unspooling flow of words, concepts, and imagery with short, sharp, functional little phrases (“They help us”), there is also in the above passage something fundamental to Kauffmann’s writing as a whole—and something that went largely unremarked upon in the many respectful tributes to the longtime *New Republic* critic upon his death in October 2013 at the age of ninety-seven. That something, simply put, is drama: in the sweeping sense of scale that cannot be concealed behind the cool judiciousness of the prose, and in the utterly serious conviction that art, in its many and variegated forms, is playing for the highest stakes imaginable. Hence Kauffmann’s critical writing is not only evaluation (though it is that, incisively), not only enthusiasm (though it is that, fervently); it is engagement, of a rare (not rarefied) variety: of a writer who has refined his craft, sharpened his perceptions, and through them broadened his range of response and feeling in celebrating an artist, Gielgud, whose work validates what he knows the medium to be capable of but so seldom achieves.

“Thus my account of debt, or a sketch of it,” Kauffmann ends his encomium to John Gielgud. “There a vision of a theater, of a film, better than has been available to him most of his career, thus a vision of is rigor in his life (says his acting), there is—consciously or not—the world better than the one he lives in. And thus, implicitly, he performs the fundamental function of art: to criticize life.”⁵⁸ If the role of art is to criticize life, then Stanley Kauffmann ceaselessly demonstrated that criticism can be a way, for those to whom it speaks most directly, to live a life in art.

Notes

1. Wolcott Gibbs, *More in Sorrow* (New York: Henry Holt, 1958), 268.
2. Stanley Kauffmann, *A World on Film: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 415.
3. Bert Cardullo, ed., *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 168.
4. Stanley Kauffmann, “Focus on Film Criticism: *I Lost It at the Movies*, by Pauline Kael,” *Harper’s Magazine* 230 (June 1965): 114.
5. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 352.
6. Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Dell, 1969), 176.
7. Stanley Kauffmann, *Figures of Light: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 110–111.
8. Stanley Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 121.
9. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 128.
10. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 299.
11. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 155.

12. Stanley Kauffmann, *Distinguishing Features: Film Criticism and Comment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 224.
13. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 47.
14. Stephen R. Lawson, "Book Review of *Living Images*," *Theater* 6.3 (Spring 1975): 73.
15. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 28.
16. Stanley Kauffmann, *Regarding Film: Film Criticism and Comment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 83.
17. Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 172.
18. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 189.
19. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 101.
20. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 207.
21. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 47.
22. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 116.
23. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 203.
24. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 11.
25. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 58.
26. Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 3.
27. Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 11.
28. Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 31.
29. Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 48.
30. Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 61.
31. Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 73.
32. Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 75.
33. Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 78.
34. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 180.
35. Stanley Kauffmann, *Living Images: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 241.
36. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 106.
37. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 272.
38. Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 182–183.
39. Edward Murray, *Nine American Film Critics* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1975), 199.
40. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 120.
41. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 48.
42. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 185.
43. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 75–76.
44. Kauffmann, *Living Images*, 240.
45. Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 42–43.
46. Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 124.
47. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 51.
48. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 149.
49. Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 249.
50. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 376–377.
51. Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 163.
52. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 294.

53. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 322.
54. Henry James, "Criticism," in his *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 264.
55. Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 226.
56. Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, trans. Charles Laughton (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 115.
57. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 406.
58. Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 412.

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Reviews of Features

(at the time of their American release)

***The Devil's Wanton* (a.k.a. *Prison*), Ingmar Bergman, 1949** (*The New Republic*, 28 May 1962)

An early Ingmar Bergman film, made in 1948 and now released in the United States as *The Devil's Wanton* (a.k.a. *Prison*), is worth seeing as an example of the truth that many serious artists have only a few themes, which they re-use all their lives. This is a kind of rough-draft film dealing with those questions of the purpose and loneliness of existence that are still Bergman's subjects.

A young writer interviews a prostitute and, after a quarrel with his wife, goes to live with the girl; when he returns to his wife, the girl commits suicide. This proves to a film director, who knows the writer, that he must not make a picture suggested by an old teacher of his: on the theme that hell is here and the devil rules. The theme is too true and the film would fail.

The picture is a bit tedious, except for the character of the pimp played by Stig Olin, but it is smoothly made and shows both fluency with the medium and an understanding of actors. It also forecasts the power of introspection that Bergman later developed so beautifully. If his sense of organic statement had developed equally with his power to probe, his best films would be masterpieces.

Variety Lights, Federico Fellini, 1950 (*The New Republic*, 15 May 1965)

Variety Lights is Federico Fellini's first film, which he co-directed with Alberto Lattuada in 1950. It is an undistinguished backstage story of a poor Italian touring troupe of vaudevillians, but the soggy story is well told. Fellini has said that he collaborated so closely with Lattuada that their individual contributions cannot be assayed; nevertheless, there are numerous elements that suggest qualities in later Fellini films. The troupe's expedition to a lawyer's home for dinner and dancing—walking through the woods at night—is reminiscent of *La Dolce Vita* (1960), as, obviously, is a piggy-back sequence at a party. The backstage atmosphere is similar to the one seen in *The Nights of Cabiria* (1957) or *La Strada* (1954), and the small town *ennui* is like that found in *I Vitelloni* (1953). There are also some familiar faces in the troupe: Giulietta Masina, Peppino de Filippo (later the prudish Dr. Antonio from the episode directed by Fellini in the anthology film *Boccaccio '70* [1962]).

It would be purely retrospective foresight to claim that one can predict the virtuosity of Fellini from this film, but there are felicities of execution all through it—whether from Lattuada or Fellini—that lift it out of the ordinary.

The Bridge on the River Kwai, David Lean, 1957 (*The Reporter*, 6 February 1958)

Sam Spiegel's production of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) is in Technicolor and CinemaScope, two and three-quarter hours long, and you will probably want to see it more than once.

Pierre Boulle, author of the 1952 novel on which the film is based, wrote the screenplay. The story, set in 1943, concerns a surrendered British battalion that is sent to a Japanese labor camp on the Siam-Burma border to build a railroad bridge. The camp commander, Colonel Saito (played by Sessue Hayakawa), decrees that the British officers shall do manual labor with their men. Since this is contrary to the Geneva Convention, Colonel Nicholson (Alec Guinness) refuses. He and his staff are cruelly imprisoned (Nicholson himself being confined in an "oven" made of steel sheets that stands in the fierce sun), but things go so badly with the construction of the bridge that Saito is forced to release them to superintend the job. The gloating battalion thinks that its colonel intends it to vacillate and fumble; instead, because he believes that his men need honest occupation

for the sake of their morale and because he cannot bear to do anything badly on purpose, Nicholson whips his command into line and builds a first-rate bridge for the Japanese railway.

Meanwhile, an American sailor (William Holden) has escaped from the camp and, after grueling hardships, has been rescued and brought to Ceylon. There he is dragooned into joining some British commandos headed by Major Warden (Jack Hawkins), who have orders to infiltrate precisely to where Holden has just come from in order to blow up the bridge. They make their way back, after a parachute drop, with the help of a Siamese guide and four girl porters, and arrive at the Kwai the night before the bridge is to be opened to its first train. They mine the bridge in the night. The next morning, it is Colonel Nicholson who discovers the mining—by his own brothers in arms—and is so absorbed with pride in his battalion's achievement that he tries to prevent the explosion. In the resulting fight, he and all but one of the demolition group, as well as Saito, are killed. The bridge is destroyed.

From the silent opening scene of birds wheeling in the sky, a shot that then moves down into the forest as jungle sounds sift in, we know that we are in good hands. David Lean's direction is masterly, with that unhurried sureness which results in the best kind of pace. Lean has intertwined the two story elements so that they reinforce each other and develop in perfect balance toward the climax. There are some reminiscent Lean touches. The ragged battalion marching jauntily into prison camp to the tune of its own whistling reminds us of the exhausted Dunkirk evacuees of *In Which We Serve* (1942), pulling themselves together at the barking of a sergeant major. The shock of the kite that the lost, parched American mistakes for a descending buzzard was contrived by the same hand that devised the first appearance of the convict Magwitch in *Great Expectations* (1946). But devices are reused and improved by all kinds of artists; why not by a movie director, especially one of the best?

The performances are never less than good and some of them are excellent. As the British commander, the quintessence of his breed, Alec Guinness is flawless. As the American, William Holden gives his best performance to date, which is to say that we are hardly ever conscious of the Holden personality. Jack Hawkins, always a reliable actor, seems slightly uncomfortable as a former Cambridge don turned dynamiter; occasionally he sounds a bit forced. James Donald, as the battalion medical officer, is compassionate and hugely appealing, and there is a magnificent performance by Sessue Hayakawa, who, some will remember, was a Hollywood star in the pre-sound days. He conveys a feeling of the tiger in the bosom such as has not been seen since the bandit in Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950); yet this animality is contained within a compass of complicated dignities and ritual.

There are some lapses in the film, all the more disturbing because of its generally high quality. The motivations for Holden's return to the Kwai are feeble. I thought that both the theme and the British colonel's character were weakened by his perception of his folly as he died, although I could accept the irony of his body's striking the plunger of the detonator that sets off the destruction of his bridge. But the riskiest element was the use of four charming Siamese girls as bearers for the demolition squad. Only the director's taste kept this from turning pure Hollywood.

The Man Within the Maniac

Some have called *The Bridge on the River Kwai* a powerful anti-war picture, and contrasted with a well-meaning adolescent yawp like Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957), it certainly is one. But it is more than a deprecation of that "madness" which is the doctor's final word, spoken amid the carnage and destruction in which the story ends.

Its basic aesthetic (not too high-flown a word for this film) is one of form. The shape of the story is superb; everything is generated from one dramatic nucleus that bears in it the fate of all concerned just as surely as a bean seed contains a miniature bean plant. The drama unfolds organically, then concludes inevitably. It is greatly to Spiegel's credit that he had no worries about "downbeat" endings. He spent his millions to fulfill an artistic design, and the audience is quite clearly grateful.

On this loom of beautiful form a subtle class drama is woven. The British officers are all gentlemen. Their attitude toward their troops is that of a gentleman toward his horse: he would neither abuse, abandon, nor associate with it. The men know and support this attitude. Against this contentedly stratified society is poised Holden, whose objective in war is, without cowardice, to survive and to whom the devotion of the British officers is insane. The key speech of the picture is one in the forest where Holden refuses to abandon the wounded Hawkins. He accuses Hawkins and Guinness of having "the guts of a maniac" because their object is not his: to get through the war, to live and be happy.

What is dramatized here, in no crude manner, is a point of social differences, two opposing attitudes toward tradition and toward oneself. At the start the conflict seems to be between Guinness and Hayakawa, but that is quickly finished. Hayakawa is clearly headed for *hara-kiri* from the day the British staff sit down at his table and plan his bridge for him; anyway, he and Guinness are brothers in one of the great freemasonries, the profession of arms. The real conflict is between Holden and Guinness.

Our immediate sympathies go to Holden. He seems so reasonable, so human, so much like us. He is no coward but is not idiotically brave. Guinness seems blind and touchingly archaic, an avatar of Valley-of-Death heroism. Well, admiration for the Guinness world is going, and regrets about it are possibly romantic. But extend the frame of reference from the military—for example, from the Korean brainwashings that posed so many ethical and legal problems for our own army—take it into life around us, and one can doubt that absolutely all the fruits of “Holdenism” are good. If the Guinness ethos is reactionary and smug, it nevertheless produces loyalties and idealism that seem beyond our present grasp. The Holden ethos eliminates fugeyism, but perhaps it also breaches the way for a range of vulgarizations that lead progressively to, among other things, the anti-intellectualism we currently bewail.

In its conflict between ideals of self-fulfillment and of self-denial, this film stands with the former; the bitter finish rightly ensures that. Yet that conflict is so fairly presented, and with such understanding, that the influence of the latter must play some part in the public’s favorable reaction to the picture. Perhaps this indicates a growing hunger in us for stronger disciplines. Perhaps we are rediscovering that there is little likelihood of self-fulfillment without self-denial. Outside the theater after the film, I heard a young man say to his girl: “No, honey, don’t you see? Stupid, yes, but he wasn’t just only stupid, he was keeping faith.”

***Touch of Evil*, Orson Welles, 1958** (*The New Republic*, 26 May 1958)

In 1941 Orson Welles was co-author, director, and star of *Citizen Kane*, which some people (including myself) think the best serious film ever made in the United States. In 1958 he is the screenwriter, director, and star of *Touch of Evil*. It was given its New York première as half of a double bill at a Brooklyn theater. From London comes word that the critics there were not invited to review the picture.

The immediate, incorrect conclusion is that Welles has declined sharply in powers. But his new picture, while not in the same galaxy with *Kane*, is an exceptionally good thriller, stunningly directed. Quick “liquidation” of a film is frequent nowadays to reduce advertising and promotion overhead; that might—just possibly—explain New York’s behavior. But London’s fear of the critics remains inexplicable. Indeed, the *Sunday Times* critic there sought it out and praised it. Are there so many better pictures available that this one has to be released furtively?

The story of *Touch of Evil* moves back and forth across the Mexican border (at Tijuana, perhaps?). A Mexican narcotics detective (Charlton Heston, with black

hair) and his new bride (Janet Leigh) are on their honeymoon there when a bomb explodes in the trunk of an American mogul's car. Welles, as a local detective, enormous with fat and padding, investigates the murder and crosses paths with Heston, who is being pursued by the head of a dope ring. Heston accidentally discovers that Welles has planted evidence in the apartment of a suspect in the bombing. Welles and the dope chief (Akim Tamiroff) conspire in a plot against Heston, which leads Welles to murder his accomplice and ends in Welles's own death at the hands of a betrayed, adoring lieutenant.

Curiously, the film is not a great deal clearer or intrinsically more interesting than this synopsis, yet it is gripping. This is because Welles is one of the most imaginative film directors alive. The general effect is as if someone had suddenly pushed you flat against a wall, pinned you there, and told you a murder story. Afterwards you reflect that the story wasn't really much; still, you couldn't budge while it was being told. Welles's mastery of hurtling movement, of rhythmic variety, of light and depth, his unerring sense of the dramatically ugly—all take the eye from point to point as if a hand were on your neck forcing you to look there, then there.

Some of Welles's usual mumble and pose are present in his own acting; there is in the beginning a directorial assumption that you know what's going on—which makes it a little difficult for a time to know what *is* going on; and so far as these things arise out of Welles's waywardness, they are annoying. But behind some of this, at least, there is purpose. Welles has always tried to blur the line dividing life from art, to lead you over easily into art at the same time that, paradoxically, he uses highly sophisticated artistic means. Sometimes there has been more blur than anything else, particularly in his acting; but frequently, in his direction, this procedure has given his films a wonderful double feeling of life overheard yet ingeniously arranged.

The opening scenes of this picture—the bustle around the burning car—are good examples of Welles at his best and worst; you can't possibly take your eyes off the screen, but you can feel your brow furrowing as you wonder who *that* character is, then feel it unfurrow as you put the pieces together. The very first sequence, under the titles, proclaims Welles's quality. There is a close-up of the dial on a time-bomb in a man's hands, then we look over it down a long shadowy arcade towards a laughing man and woman who approach; the camera pulls back and high up as the assassin races along a dark side street to plant the bomb in the car, the laughing couple drive off, and we follow them through the crowded Mexican streets while the music ticks away on the soundtrack. There are point and sweep, precision and thrust for you, all in a sequence of two minutes. The story is not only begun startlingly (not a difficult trick in itself) but in such a way that you

know the director has the instincts of a painter, a musician, a dramatist, and of Dickens' Fat Boy (who, in *The Pickwick Papers* [1836], loved to make people's flesh creep). What a relief to know so soon that, whatever it may lack, the film cannot be boring.

The question as to why a man of Welles directorial stature devotes himself to such inferior material does not stand alone. The reverse of that question is: why did he make a hash of such films as *Macbeth* (1948) and *Othello* (1952). The former seemed a piece of mere caprice, like a naughty boy doodling on a mural; the latter had some beautiful shots of Cyprus and a fascinating performance of Iago by that all-round theatrical wizard, Micheál MacLiammóir of Dublin, but Welles cut away from all his own big moments like a thoroughbred jumper electing to walk around the barrier.

Soon the question resolves into: why hasn't Welles had one of the greatest directorial careers in film history? The answer may lie more with a psychoanalyst than a critic, but one can hazard a sympathetic guess. His innate gifts brought him so much success so early that he lacks the discipline of failure. Not every effort of his first years was successful, but very early acclaim shaped his ego in such a way that he could attribute any failure to a deficiency in the material, to blindness in the public, to anything but himself. Thus he has never developed a sense of responsibility to the audience—not to the mass audience but to the most demanding audience he could envision. Without that sense, no matter how talented, one always remains something of an amateur.

Still, his gifts exist, his achievements stand. I have seen *Citizen Kane* ten times, the last time within the year, and would see it again tonight if I could. (How many of the outstanding films of 1941 are worth one re-visit?) Each viewing brings out new dimensions, new textures; each viewing makes clear how much directors like John Huston, Sidney Lumet, Martin Ritt, Delbert and Daniel Mann owe to it. If D. W. Griffith "invented" film direction, Welles's took it—in one leap—to a point past which no American has yet proceeded.

What will his future be? As an actor *per se*, one expects little of him; his performance in *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958) seems to be a test of how far he can "ride" his director (Ritt). But his own directorial talents are as striking as ever. If *Touch of Evil* had come from France directed by, say, Henri-Georges Clouzot, it would now be playing at all the art houses, and phrases like "structural plasticity" and "delicate diabolism" would be filling the critical air. Nevertheless, exciting as it is, the film is not good enough for its director. After seventeen years Welles does not need to prove that he has gifts, he needs to use them. He has plenty of time left in which to make fine cinematic art. It is a plain but not simple matter of discipline and aspiration.

Gigi, Vincente Minnelli, 1958 (*The New Republic*, 9 June 1958)

Hollywood, like the solid, middle-class body it is, likes to slip off its shoes and settle down with a nice entertaining story. “Enough, for a while,” it seems to say, “of struggling to be highbrow. We’ve done a couple of pictures this year on social problems, we’ve tackled our Faulkner and O’Neill, we’ve strained to make films out of basically unfilmable bestsellers just because they’re bestsellers. We’re entitled to a little relaxation.” That relaxation benefits us, too, for it often takes the form of a kind of picture that Hollywood does best: Westerns, suspense, comedy (visual, not verbal), musicals. Better *The Gunfighter* (1950) than *No Down Payment* (1957), better a new Hitchcock than Selznicked Hemingway. One senses this relaxation immediately in *Gigi* (1958), the new MGM color musical. Spirits are released, appropriate talents are working at the top of their bent.

Gigi is consistently pleasant but is extraordinary in only one way. Do not be deceived by the advertising; the real star is Cecil Beaton, who designed the costumes and scenery. When the story ambles and the songs don’t quite soar, the clothes and settings continue to enchant. A deaf man could enjoy *Gigi*. Ever since he did the costumes and décor for the 1946 ballet of *Camille* (1852) and the 1946 revival of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), Americans have known that Beaton has an exceptional sympathy for Victorian costume that enables him to pick and balance the most delightful elements in it. His work in this film is gorgeous.

The screenplay is based on Colette’s 1944 story (hardly a “novel,” as the titles claim), which tells of a fifteen-year-old Parisian girl at the turn of the century. She is reared by her grandmother, a retired, moderately successful courtesan, and by her great-aunt, a resoundingly successful one. They are training her to take her place in the family profession. (When Gigi is told by elegant Aunt Alicia that they are not ordinary people, she says, “Yes, I understand that we don’t marry.” Aunt replies: “Marriage is not forbidden to us. Instead of marrying ‘at once’, it sometimes happens that we marry ‘at last’.”) A wealthy young man named Gaston likes to visit their flat out of friendship for Grandmamma and the child, Gigi—who becomes nicely nubile. A cordial Gallic business arrangement for her affections is proposed by Gaston and is rejected by Gigi (to her mentors’ shock), doubly rejected when Gaston says he loves her. Gaston then realizes that he wants Gigi permanently; the unexpected proposal, marriage, is made and accepted.

Leslie Caron (with a dubbed singing voice) is coltishly appealing as Gigi. Caron, who looks like a more maidenly sister of Brigitte Bardot, has played the part in a non-musical version on the London stage, and it is apparent why the character, as such, attracts her. But—in this version, at least—Gaston’s part is more

interesting. *Gigi* is a ripening fruit waiting to be plucked; it is Gaston who progresses dramatically, who arrives at the point where he plucks the waiting fruit. As Gaston, the impeccably handsome Louis Jourdan is not quite good enough; he lacks subtlety, precision, and, in spite of his good looks, scintillation. Hermione Gingold is more acceptable than usual as Grandmamma, and Isabel Jeans is delicately regal as that 1900 Diane de Poitiers, Aunt Alicia.

There is, beyond Beaton's designs, one unmixed blessing in the picture. Someone had the happy thought of writing in an uncle for Gaston, an aging philosophical *boulevardier*, and of giving the part to Maurice Chevalier. Every time Chevalier approaches, one mutters, "No, it's too silly. I'm not going to be charmed by a man who deliberately sets out to charm me"; and every time, Chevalier prevails. Even though you can see him cunningly bringing to bear on you all the wiles he has acquired in fifty years of music halls, he wins; and you are happy to have him win. It is Chevalier's deftness that makes acceptable the song "Thank Heaven for Little Girls"; it is his innuendo without cliché and his knowledge of how to build an exit that make a movie audience applaud "I'm Glad I'm Not Young Anymore." How cheering it is to see a player who was renowned for sex appeal develop what might be called Veteran Appeal.

The ten songs in the picture were written by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, authors of the score of the 1956 Broadway musical *My Fair Lady*. (Lerner also wrote the screenplay for *Gigi*.) The much-discussed resemblance of this score to that of *My Fair Lady* is indeed strong; one of the songs—Gaston's discovery of how much *Gigi* means to him—is in form almost a duplicate of "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face." But although none of the tunes is memorable, all of them are adequate. The film was directed by Vincente Minnelli with the same dexterity and taste that he evinced in such musicals as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *An American in Paris* (1951), and *The Band Wagon* (1953). Much of this picture was made in Paris, and Minnelli has avoided the obvious. He takes us instead into the lovely parks of Paris; in fact, the park statuary is made to play a kind of subsidiary role.

It is interesting to note how any hint of distastefulness—in the idea of two old women raising a girl to be a courtesan, in Chevalier's waiting around for little girls to grow up, in Jourdan's financial offer—has been kept out of the film. In this the moviemakers have caught Colette's flavor in the matter. The boundaries of the story are firmly marked and, within them, the characters take their ethics seriously, different from ours though they may be. Their ambitions are revered by them; their conduct is graceful and never unkind. Serious values would look false in this context. Romance, not sociology, is our theme, and it makes for two amiable hours.

***Modigliani of Montparnasse* (1958) and *The Night Watch* (a.k.a. *The Hole*, 1960), Jacques Becker** (*The New Republic*, 25 April 1964)

The late Jacques Becker is best known in America for *Casque d'Or* (1952), a film of *crimes passionelles* in nineteenth-century Paris that introduced Simone Signoret to us and which is a premier example of fine period re-creation. Now we have Becker's penultimate picture and his last one.

Modigliani of Montparnasse (1958), the next-to-last film of both Gérard Philipe and Jacques Becker, is no credit to that fine actor and good director. It is factually distorted, monochromatic, and unvitalized, and it adds nothing to what has already been done in films about gifted artists whose difficulties have wrecked their lives. *Modigliani* is made virtually anonymous (it might almost be X, the Struggling Painter). In perception of the artist *vis-à-vis* the world and *vis-à-vis* himself in the world, it is not nearly as good a picture as the far-from-flawless *Lust for Life* (1956). Admirers of Philipe and Becker will be unhappy; will hope to be consoled by Becker's last film (*Le Trou* [1960]); and will also hope that the French government soon permits the export of Philipe's last film, from 1959, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. (De Gaulle, Malraux, and company ostensibly are afraid that this modernized version of the 1782 Laclos novel will reflect unfavorably on France, forgetting that their ban on its export hardly reflects favorably.)

Becker's last film, *The Night Watch* (originally *The Hole*, or *Le Trou*), is a prison-break drama and, alas, a disappointment. A friend of mine goes to see prisoner-of-war escape pictures (*The Wooden Horse* [1950], *The Great Escape* [1963], etc., etc., etc.) to have one question answered: How will the tunnelers get rid of the dirt *this* time? There is not much more to concern the viewer in this civilian escape story; its commonplaceness is not leavened by the less-than-novel novelty of being based on fact. The picture comes heralded by praise in several classy film journals. They seem to have been impressed with Becker's theory: by *dwelling* on the details, by making us watch (seemingly) every blow of the chisel on cement floor and walls, he hoped to give us the experience in thicker texture. But, in practice, this abstract idea soon dissolves into tedium. Besides, the quasi-naturalistic use of time does not jibe with the flimsy look of the cell setting and the incredible excavation noise with the guards just outside.

Two good points. There is a sharp shocker at the end, viewed through a periscope mirror. There is a subtle scene in which a guard examines the contents of packages sent to prisoners, methodically slicing cheeses, sausages, and cakes to

make sure they contain no smuggled items. The use of the same unclean knife for all this, the “brutalization” of the food while the prisoner waits and watches, is a small epitome of humiliation.

***The World of Apu*, Satyajit Ray, 1959** (*The New Republic*, 6 June 1960)

Satyajit Ray, the Indian director, has now completed his film trilogy, whose first two parts were *Pather Panchali* (1955) and *Aparajito* (1956). The third film, *The World of Apu* (1959), is a considerable departure in tone from the preceding two. Without a knowledge of the two novels (1929, 1932) by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay on which the three films are based, it is impossible to say whether this departure is the novelist’s or Ray’s. But the break is sharp.

Pather Panchali was the chronicle of a poor Bengali couple and their children; in the second picture, we watched the son of the family progress through school days to college, and the film closed with him flapping his big feet down the dusty road to the city, leaving the village (and a traditional life) behind. Both these films, despite their technical and other shortcomings, were remarkable for their revelations about Indian life, their gentle, unsophisticated poetry, and especially for the sense—unrestrained yet inescapable—that this was a national epic. It was, in that regard, a classical work: the characters were all individuals; still, they were telling us a story larger than their own.

The World of Apu is, by that standard, a highly romantic work; its range is narrower—one man’s life. It tells of Apu’s marriage (in peculiar circumstances), of his falling in love with his wife subsequently, of her death in childbirth, of his *Wanderjahre* in search of soul’s peace, and his reconciliation with his son. It has some of the defects of the previous films and many of the virtues; but it has none of the quality of a national epic. Apu is now Apu, nothing more. His story is effective insofar as it strikes personal responses, but the story of India or of today’s Bengal is not being told through him.

This necessarily diminishes the film, but it need not have diminished it quite so much if the romantic story had maintained more of a grip in its own terms. The circumstances of the marriage we can accept as a part of Indian life—though how unusual I can’t say. (He is a guest at a wedding. Just before the ceremony the bridegroom is discovered to be insane. Apu is implored to replace the groom even though he doesn’t know the girl; if not, by custom, she will never be able to marry.) But the sorrows of this Bengali Werther, his wanderings after her death with a staff and sprouting beard, his failure to recover from an emotional wound in the

best self-dramatizing style, with much striding across fields into the sunset—these things are divisive between us and the work.

So it cannot be said that the trilogy is sustained satisfactorily to its conclusion. Yet the fact that the last film turns sentimental should not make us lose perspective on the whole work. (Bernard Shaw notes that in the last scene of *Siegfried* [1857], Wagner's four-part *Ring of the Nibelungs* [1869–76; *Siegfried* is part III] ceases to be music-drama and becomes opera; but we haven't discarded the tetralogy because of that.) Ray has accomplished a work that, although notably uneven, puts him among foremost contemporary directors by reason of a general purity of vision, devotion, and sheer will to use the cinema for large pertinences.

***North by Northwest* (1959) and *Psycho* (1960), Alfred Hitchcock** (*The New Republic*, 29 August 1960)

The decline of Alfred Hitchcock, the director of *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) and *The 39 Steps* (1935), is no longer news. It is quite clear that Hitchcock is dead and that an obscene ghost is mocking him by superficially imitating him. His last film, *Vertigo* (1958), was an asinine, unredeemed bore. His next, *North by Northwest* (1959), started more promisingly but soon lost us in cliché and preposterousness. (Why didn't the Long Island police know that the woman in the mansion was an impostor? Why was the United Nations delegate murdered? Etc., etc.) Like an old whore struggling desperately for remembered rapture, Hitchcock fumbled for his early ability to render familiar scenes and objects scary. But the urgent, encompassing reality of his first films was missing, and without it, his antics simply looked foolish.

The scene in the cornfield in *North by Northwest*, in which a crop-dusting plane strafes Cary Grant, is probably the low point in Hitchcock's career—pure comic-book stuff. And in the climax (this time it's the Mount Rushmore Memorial instead of the Statue of Liberty), all I could think of, as Grant and Eva Marie Saint scrambled down the huge face of Washington, was whether the Actors' Studio, of which Saint is an alumna, would have approved her performance. But then the Method provides little guidance for hiding under Washington's right nostril.

A much-publicized trademark of a Hitchcock film is a brief appearance by the director himself. Equally standard by now is a huge two-shot scene, long protracted, in which the hero and heroine nibble each other's ears and neck, and converse in suggestive dialogue. It has the same relation to sex that Hitchcock's recent pictures have to suspense.

And that includes the otherwise much-lauded *Psycho* (1960). *Sons and Lovers* might be the title of Hitchcock's new film, which is a suspense story dealing with a son (Anthony Perkins) and some lovers (Janet Leigh, John Gavin). This time

Hitchcock has put his usual face-nibbling sex scene at the very beginning (as usual, it is quite dispensable), and then goes on to pad the first half of the picture for a reason that can't be revealed without giving away the twist. The whole thing is, in fact, much too long, and the plot is full of holes. (Why, in ten years, hasn't someone from the town seen the old woman walking past the window of the house? Why does the girl's sister insist, on such brief acquaintance, that the private detective has not merely run off?) Two murders and a third attempt are among the most vicious I have ever seen in films, with Hitchcock employing his considerable skill in direction and cutting, and in the use of sound and music, to shock us past horror-entertainment into ... resentment.

***General della Rovere*, Roberto Rossellini, 1959**

(*The New Republic*, 12 December 1960)

The report of Roberto Rossellini's artistic death has been at least partially exaggerated. His latest film, *General della Rovere* (1959), does not stand with *Rome, Open City* (1945) and *Paisan* (1946), but it is a creditable work, touched with beauty. In it Rossellini is both helped and obsessed by his ability to create atmosphere, and he is finally denied the tragic heights at which he aimed by the cleverness of his story; but Vittorio De Sica's fine performance gives much of the film poignancy.

It is Genoa, 1943, under the Badoglio government and the German occupation. De Sica is an engaging con man who lives off prostitutes and by a share of the bribes he passes on to Germans from Italians who want to help their imprisoned relatives. He is arrested, and a German colonel decides to use his talents. If De Sica will pose in prison as the secretly executed partisan General della Rovere, if he will thus ferret out the identity of the underground leader in that prison whom the general was to meet, the Germans will ship him to Switzerland. De Sica agrees; but the respect the "general" is accorded by his fellow prisoners and their heroism have a purifying effect on him. He goes to the firing squad—still as the general—rather than inform.

Almost half of this long film could have been spared. The despair of the era and the con man's sordidness could have been concisely rendered. The drama really begins with his arrest. And there is a basic conflict between the O. Henry ingenuity of the plot and the hugeness of the theme: namely, man's willingness to give his life for an abstraction that he knows can never be completely realized, but which must be preserved as a goal. It is the gravest of subjects and demands the simplest confrontation possible. Nevertheless, slowly and within narrow limits, the picture generates power.

Hannes Messemer, the colonel, is for a change a German officer who does not secretly sympathize with democracy. De Sica not only makes his conversion utterly convincing, he makes the earlier villain understandable; and confirms his place as one of the best actors in films.

***Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, Alain Resnais, 1959**

(*The New Republic*, 13 June 1960)

Few foreign pictures have been heralded by the high praise that has preceded *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959). At last this film arrives, and the praise is certainly explained, if not completely justified. Alain Resnais, the director, has created a poem on film. It is an imperfect poem; still, no less a term than “poetic” can be used for its essences and much of its’ execution.

This oddly titled picture is the product of a Franco-Japanese company, takes place in Hiroshima, and is a love story. But these are only skeletal reasons for the title; more are made manifest. A brief affair is taking place between a Japanese architect and a French actress who belongs to a company that has come there to make a propaganda film about peace, using the atomic museum, surviving victims, and local protest marchers. Both the lovers are married; both know that their affair must be short-lived and know, too, that this is much more than a merely sexual encounter.

Because of the subject of the film that she is making, because the man’s parents were killed by the bomb, because the woman’s youth was blighted by a tragic affair with a German soldier stationed in her native town of Nevers, the love story becomes a vessel for symbolism. This happens inevitably and adroitly; you feel that, given these materials, it could not be otherwise, and at the same time you enjoy the art with which the director and author have exploited the inevitability—the lyricism with which the initial situation has been opened up to reveal its implications and the forces that have brought these two people together.

Before long, what you are watching is a dramatization of the human history that persists under and after the giant cold structures of political history. The woman, for it is especially her story, dramatizes the truth that prescribed enmities do not affect emotional reactions. This particular eighteen-year-old girl in Nevers could not have helped falling in love with this particular German soldier if there had been twenty Hitlers; and the resultant anguish was inescapable in a society that has no room for that truth. But the anguish has tempered her values so that now she can distinguish between formality and reality; the formalities of the façade may be necessary in order to conduct the world’s business, but the emotional realities behind the façade are our only true insurance of continuity, literally and figuratively. On this theme the other implications of the film are based—its anti-war ones. Indeed, its anti-political themes flower from it.

But they are not sustained. The film broadens from a poignant “Gallic” love story into a poem of some profound resonances. This broadening, this evocation of larger and larger responses, leads us to expect a conclusion of towering dimensions. We are made hungry for it. But the film diminishes. The focus narrows in its last quarter, and it becomes what it was at the beginning—in fact, even less, for the locale is irrelevant at the end. It simply becomes a question of whether the woman will abandon her family in France and remain with this man (who will presumably abandon his family), or whether she will return to her husband. This section is not only uncomfortably cramped in scope as opposed to what precedes it but is uncomfortably protracted, with a number of scenes in which, dog-like, the man follows the woman around all night from place to place, hoping that she will change her mind about leaving in the morning. There is an unsuccessful attempt at the very end to recapture the picture’s larger aspects, when he says “You are Nevers, I am Hiroshima”; but the director has admitted—in a *Film Quarterly* interview—that the line’s meaning was uncertain to him. As it was to me. It echoes the title and vice versa: but not much more than that.

Still, no disappointments in the film can dull three major accomplishments in it. The screenplay of Marguerite Duras is, as even a non-speaker of French can tell, startlingly conceived and subtly executed. The direction of Alain Resnais is gently but intensely sympathetic and seems to caress the story into life. The performance of Emmanuelle Riva is a little ode to the ultimate loneliness but indestructibility of the human being in a world not demonstrably designed for full and happy human life. Eiji Okada, as her lover, gives a completely adequate performance but without Riva’s dagger-like pathos. An added merit—for us English speakers—is the subtlety by Noelle Gillmor; it is as good as any I have ever seen.

Despite its final shortcomings, this is an extraordinary, extraordinarily beautiful picture. As a pacifist statement, it is the most moving I can remember since Abel Gance’s pre-war *J’accuse!* (1919, 1938; a.k.a. *That They May Live*). As an idyll of intimacy, it is in a class with the work of Bergman, Renoir, Carné, and the other notable explorers of the affinities and abysses between man and woman. And *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* is cinematic in all its being, not a converted play or novel; it is quite inconceivable as anything but a film.

***Testament of Orpheus*, Jean Cocteau, 1960**

(*The New Republic*, 14 May 1962)

Jean Cocteau has made his valedictory film, *Testament of Orpheus* (1960), a sort of sequel to his *Orpheus* (1950), which contains some of the same characters along with some friends of his, including Picasso. It is a fantasy in which he (in person) enacts his search for beauty and states his aesthetic. What an extraordinary man

he is, ranging from authentic poetry to successful chichi, a laureate both of Oxford University and of *Vogue*.

His last film, however, is considerably tedious because it seems so thoroughly *passé*; Beauty with a capital B went out with Oscar Wilde, and the poet as self-conscious hero is deservedly suspect. But every time you're ready to dismiss it all as gifted affectation, he does or says something genuinely imaginative or enlightening. He once wrote that, when he was a child, his family had a neighbor whose carriage was washed weekly with champagne. In view of such a childhood, one can only congratulate Cocteau on achieving as much with his many talents as he has done.

***Divorce Italian Style*, Pietro Germi, 1961**

(*The New Republic*, 8 October 1962)

Divorce Italian Style (1961) is an immediately provocative title because, as the publicized plight of a certain star has made clear, there is no divorce in Italy. There is, however, a provision in the Penal Code that a husband who makes a *corpus delicti* of a wife found in *flagrante delicto* is subject to a sentence of only three to seven years. In practice he often gets the minimum and, with time off for good behavior, serves about eighteen months. The logic, for an unhappy husband, is inevitable.

Marcello Mastroianni plays a bored Sicilian nobleman (in itself a comic subject to mainland Italians) who is weary of his pillowy wife and is smitten with a fetching sixteen-year-old. Taking the penal code as his guide, he schemes to lure his wife into extra-curricular activity and then to divorce her, Italian style. Mastroianni, with hair plastered by day and tousled by night, exudes ennui and libido. Odoardo Spadaro, his father, is so austere handsome that his maid-pinching is all the funnier. Daniele Rocca breathes piety and passion as the wife, and young Stefania Sandrelli makes a lovely nymph for this faun's afternoon.

Much of the film, which Pietro Germi directed, is pitilessly and wittily observant: as in its picture of the male chauvinism of the town life, its hint of *mafia* braggadocio, its candor about this raffish aristocracy. (After their siesta the men sit around through the rest of the day in their pajama coats.) But the picture wavers in tone, and its inconsistency defeats it.

Cruel comedy (at which the French are so adept) has one absolute requisite: it cannot happen to characters we care about or who are made real, otherwise the fact of their killing or being killed is too vivid to be funny. If the baron simply lusted after the girl or were stupidly insipid about her, if she were a ninny or a contriver, we could laugh wholeheartedly; but (for example) their encounter while picking flowers is too touching to fit in with comic murder. And the wife is not nearly repugnant enough to be killable. Some of the developments, too, are out of key with place and character.

A Sicilian wife does not desert her husband on the slight provocation in this film, and the final touch is incongruous with the patient simplicity of the girl.

***Ivan's Childhood*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1962**

(*The New Republic*, 3 August 1963)

The Russians continue to produce evidence of their cinematic deterioration. Some future cultural anthropologist (Chinese, perhaps) will be able to document from the postwar Soviet film the fattening of Soviet self-regard, the diminution of national dynamics, and—especially—the petrification of patriotic fervor into arty attitudes.

The latest example is called *Ivan's Childhood* (1962). A twelve-year-old boy, orphaned in World War II, serves with fanatical zeal as a scout for the Russians until the Germans catch him and hang him. The performance by the boy, Kolya Burlaiev, is unaffected and affecting. But around him posture a lot of creased-face actors as consciously full of simple nobility as Soviet statues in public parks. The director, Andrei Tarkovsky, has added large dollops of French impressionist film technique, using subjectivity where it is confusing, ellipsis where it defeats empathy, and poetic reprise where it underscores nothing but his own ambitions toward art. I doubt that Tarkovsky saw Serge Bourguignon's *Sundays and Cybele* (1962) before he made *Ivan's Childhood*, yet these two directors are fellow dealers in facile symbols, traders in the aesthetically obvious.

Inevitably there are some telling moments—particularly in a birch forest. But Tarkovsky overdoes them: the forest scenes go on too long, and the lengthy love episode there turns out to be pointless. Inevitably, too, as in all heavy Middle and East European works, there are occasional boring character cameos. When the old actor appears with his whiskered head trembling and a pet rooster under his arm, we all brace ourselves for an interminable poignant vignette. The third-hand, derived quality of such films as this one and *Ballad of A Soldier* (1959), their inability to be anything more than “movies” of one kind or another about a subject of such terrible reality as the German war—this condition would worry me more, if I were Khrushchev, than abstract expressionist painting.

***The Manchurian Candidate*, John Frankenheimer,**

1962 (*The New Republic*, 1 December 1962)

The Manchurian Candidate (1962) has a clever gimmick: the Chinese Reds brainwash an American officer (Laurence Harvey) captured in the Korean War and make of him a psychological time-bomb. They bury ideas and obedience in him

and plan to “detonate” him after he returns home and reaches an influential position. The cleverness is obfuscated with enough further gimmicks to furnish three or four other films: in addition to the Red plot, a McCarthyite plot to take over America; a domineering mother who is not only a plotter but has incestuous feeling for her son; an arbitrarily busted and patched romance with a liberal Senator’s daughter; hypnotisms, dreams, and plentiful murders. Frank Sinatra, Harvey’s Army pal and eventual nemesis, arrives with his usual built-in plot. Every Sinatra part has to have a scene in which he beats up a bigger man (here it is a karate fight); and there must be a girl who, on sight, wants to go to bed with him and then falls overwhelmingly in love with him. The reasons for all this are between the slight Mr. Sinatra and his analyst.

The picture features the supposedly sharp, sexy dialogue of George Axelrod, hard as rusty nails; and it has been directed by John Frankenheimer with an eagerness to distinguish himself that is matched only by his memory of Hitchcock films.

***Electra*, Michael Cacoyannis, 1962** (*The New Republic*, 19 January 1963)

The question of adaptation now broadens out from a matter of form, purely, to include style. This season has brought us two Greek films adapted from classic plays, *Antigone* (1961) and now *Electra* (1962). The second is the more successful because Michael Cacoyannis, its director, is more aware of its inappropriateness. He would, of course, state it differently, perhaps would say that he has put old wine into a new bottle. In fact he did say: “It is based only in the broadest sense on Euripides but it is not a modern-dress version. ... It is classic in the fullest sense ...”

This last is not only impossible, Cacoyannis fully demonstrates its impossibility. Although the script may only be based on Euripides, it tries to traffic in the same tremendous passions. The play was designed for performance (in masks) to an audience of many thousands, some of whom were a hundred yards away, to be declaimed to music with formal movement, with its cast always seen at one fixed, great distance; the film is seen in distances varying from long shot to close-up, with mixed movements and rhythms and the camera’s motion added, with photography insisting on the realism of the individual rather than his symbolic reality. Texture is drastically altered; the chorus—which, besides its dance and dramatic aspects, was a kind of amplifying system for the back rows—becomes merely a nuisance; and the gods, whose appearance was fitting in the abstraction of the theater and necessary to the themes anywhere, are eliminated as *ex machina*.

In making *Antigone*, George Tzavellas clung fairly closely to the original of Sophocles and achieved sincere stiltedness. Cacoyannis, a more talented film director, has foreseen this pitfall and has tried to “lick” Euripides. He has slimmed down the dialogue (although he adds some reviling of her mother’s body by Electra) and has beefed up the physical movement wherever possible—even to the point of taking us into the peasant’s house with Clytemnestra. (Euripides was a daring innovator but he would have been horrified by that.) Cacoyannis attempts to preserve style by using attitudes and stately groupings derived from Greek bas-reliefs and urns, but the more he tries, the more it looks like pretty posing, too studied and statuesque for the busybody camera. Only some arts and styles—ballet, opera, classic theater—were designed to exist at a remove from the audience, in conventions too large for intimacy.

Walter Lassally, the cameraman of *A Taste of Honey* (1961) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), makes a considerable journey eastward and back in time to photograph *Electra* in steely sun and muted shadows, and gives us the austerity of the Greek landscape. (Some of the scenes in palaces and temples seem queer. These buildings weren’t ancient at the time; they must have looked new.) Irene Papas, distinguished and smoldering, does her best to sustain a high Handelian line as Electra, as she tried in *Antigone*, but is cramped and harried by the form itself. However, some moments, like the recognition of Orestes (Yannis Fertis), strike home.

None of this is to argue that the film form is incapable of tragedy or to say that the film will necessarily always be inferior to the great Greek theater. It is only to note—in formal and stylistic comparison—that *Electra* on film is basically as incongruous as Antonioni on stage. One can understand that a Greek film director has been tempted by his nation’s heritage as the English have been tempted by Shakespeare. From Olivier’s *Henry V* (1944) we remember most vividly the flight of the arrows and the charge of the horses at Agincourt, from *Electra* the stony, shadowed mountains—not Shakespeare or Euripides. *Some Like It Hot* (1959) is better, as film, than either.

***The Fire Within*, Louis Malle, 1963** (*The New Republic*, 7 March 1964)

The young French director, Louis Malle, made an inauspicious début a few years ago with *The Lovers* (1958) fulfilled his lack of promise with *A Very Private Affair* (1962), and underscored his coterie cuteness with *Zazie in the Metro* (1960). He plumbs new depths of sententious boredom in *The Fire Within* (1963), the story of

the last forty-eight hours in the life of an unsuccessfully reformed alcoholic before he kills himself. The hero is of course soulful, suffering, symbolic; he is also loquacious and does not lack a gift for swan-song histrionics. He is never as interesting to us as he is to himself and to his many friends, who seem to like nothing better than to have a prospective suicide in for lunch or dinner and to attend carefully his wallowings in despair.

Maurice Ronet does much better by the part than it deserves and cannot be held responsible for its suffocating tediousness. Jeanne Moreau makes a brief appearance as a *très sympathique* friend, looking particularly—and no doubt deliberately—unkempt and dirty. For any Francophobe seeking an instance of French pseudo-profundity, this film will serve.

***The Servant*, Joseph Losey, 1963** (*The New Republic*, 21 March 1964)

The Servant, directed by Joseph Losey with a screenplay by Harold Pinter based on Robin Maugham's 1948 novel, has five major characters: a young English gentleman, his fiancée, his servant, the servant's "sister," and the gentleman's house. Most of these characters—including the last one—are extraordinarily well-delineated and interrelated for about the first half of this film. In the second half, natural motions come perceptibly under the influence of theatrical ambitions, and what has been a series of events becomes a series of effects. Some of the latter are striking, although they go on too long; but the film begins, and for some time continues, on a higher level.

The opening, accompanied by John Dankworth's admirable music, finds the servant crossing the King's Road in Chelsea. (Behind him is that notable London curiosity, the shop of Thomas Crapper, Sanitary Engineer.) In Royal Avenue he enters an empty house and discovers, dozing in a camp chair, the new young owner with whom he has a job interview. The entry into the house, the servant awake and the master asleep, the ease with which the young man takes command as he dozily awakes, all begin this film with a tone of intelligent purpose. We follow with interest as the house is furnished, as the servant demonstrates his aptitudes, as the young man's fiancée senses something in the servant that unsettles her, and as we go down the long path to the reversal of roles at the end.

Losey is an expatriate American whose reputation has up to now outrun the quality of his work shown in the United States. In this film there is, from the first frame, a pleasant feeling of control, of imaginative selectivity. Ingeniously—particularly by the way he frames actions in doorways, on stairways, in angles of

rooms—he makes the place itself a presence, makes this neat little house a microcosm of the tight little, right little isle. He has touched in small details—a cigar clenched in the young man's teeth as he reclines discoursing to his girl, off-hand wine snobbery—that indicate casually a life-view based on centuries' acceptances.

Pinter's dialogue, through a good deal of the picture, is like large-scale pointillism, which puts a dot of speech exactly where needed, where it explicates the surrounding silence and vice versa. There are two scenes—Pinter pieces, in a restaurant and in a country house—that in critical rigor ought to be objected to as extraneous. (Pinter himself plays a bit in the restaurant.) But they are so funny that it would be churlish to cavil.

What must be criticized, however, are both the story and theme. The servant corrupts the master: to get control of his money? Out of sheer viciousness? Or both? When is the plot laid? Is it in the servant's mind when he first takes the job? There is no hint that he ever did anything like it before; he has excellent references. Then when does he make his plans? Having discovered the servant's perfidy, why does the master re-hire him? If there is homosexual domination to be inferred, why has it not been previously implied? If the class barrier between the two disintegrates so speedily after the servant's return, why need the servant and the girl continue their plot in the scene where she comes out of the rain?

Thematically the script will not bear much weight. The master is autocratic and incompetent, the servant is skillful; but there is nothing to sustain an allegory of social revolution. Napoleon said that he could hear the tumbrils of the French Revolution in Figaro's last-act soliloquy. But this servant's motive is not class discontent; he is Iago, not a Jacobin, as witness the wild parties at the end of the picture. It becomes a suspense thriller of corruptive mania or criminality, and the hints of social relevance are mere trappings.

This change of texture is marked when Sarah Miles, the servant's "sister," enters. Miles confirms again that she is an actress of small resources; and her presence seems to have affected Losey adversely, because his only heaviness in direction are with her, particularly in her seduction of the youth.

It is James Fox, the young master, who gives the film its absolutely essential quality. Dirk Bogarde, as the corrupter, has the more showy part and is excellent in it: his accent, bearing, his eventual almost attractive petulance. But without Fox's easy aristocracy, there would be no heights from which to descend.

If the whole film were up to the level of its first hour or so, if the script were seamless, if Losey had had clearly in mind whether he was making a *soigné* melodrama like *Kind Lady* (film, 1951), a psycho-sexual mystery like *The Turn of the Screw* (film, 1959), or even a latter-day view of Waugh's Metroland horrors (in the novels *Decline and Fall* [1928], *Vile Bodies* [1930], and *A Handful of Dust* [1934]),

his talents, which are ample, would have been fulfilled. He does not lack ability but rather clarity of purpose.

***Kiss Me, Stupid*, Billy Wilder, 1964** (*The New Republic*, 9 January 1965)

Billy Wilder, European in origin, also converts European material to commercial film use. A lengthy, unimportant study could be written about the sources of *Some Like It Hot* (1959): a German story; *One, Two, Three* (1961): a Molnár play; *Irma la Douce* (1963): a Parisian musical routed through London; and his latest, *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964): an Italian play; and how, in varying degree, he reshapes them for Hollywood—from the brilliance of *Some Like It Hot* to the tired, vacuous sexiness of his latest picture. Wilder has been berated for cynicism and for insufficient cynicism, for heartless satire and for soft-centered satire. *Kiss Me, Stupid* lies outside the range of interest of critical guns, as inconsiderable and dull as any failed sex joke.

A music teacher in a small Nevada town (called Climax, for a start) has song-writing ambitions. Through coincidences, a big pop singer has to stay overnight in his house and demands female companionship. The teacher, madly jealous of the wife, sends her away and gets a local trollop to impersonate his wife so that the star can seduce her and, in a blissful state, buy some of her “husband’s” songs. The idea has farce possibilities; none of them is realized because the pace drags, the dialogue is only suggestive, not funny, and the acting is abominable. From Dean Martin, the singer, and Kim Novak, the trollop, one expects little and gets less. Cliff Osmond, the teacher’s collaborator, has a large part and is ridiculously incompetent. Ray Walston, the teacher, is here so crude that, if he had given this performance early in his career, he never would have had one.

I cannot remember that Wilder has ever permitted such bad acting in his films, particularly by men, or has shown such a soggy sense of tempo and humor. Age notoriously induces sentimentality, and perhaps this film is the form that sentimentality takes with the formerly wickedly witty. If so, we can regret the change. In artistic heaven there is more joy over a sinner who does not repent; or relent.

***The Pumpkin Eater*, Jack Clayton, 1964** (*The New Republic*, 19 December 1964)

The Pumpkin Eater (1964) is by Jack Clayton, who made the extraordinarily good *Room at the Top* (1959) and then made the mistake of attempting James’s 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw* (as *The Innocents* [1961]). Here, with Harold Pinter

as his adapter, he has taken a plush-lined ladies' novel by Penelope Mortimer and taken it seriously. A woman has a compulsion to have children, has a large number by two husbands, falls in love with another man, divorces her husband, and in effect drives her new husband to intensify his philandering by her philo-progenitive craze. This, it seems to me, is a subject for comedy, but it is treated with stately seriousness.

Anne Bancroft, who, like Kim Stanley, went to England to make her most recent film, comes off less well than Stanley here because her role is principally one of dreary noble suffering. Peter Finch, the Rip Van Winkle of actors, seems almost to have awakened from his long sleep and may one day once again be worth watching. There are two sharp moments. James Mason has a scene, as a married friend, in which he plays a descending scale from amiability to vicious sexual aggression; and there is a beauty parlor scene in which Bancroft, trapped under a hair dryer, has to listen to a demented monologue from a woman next to her. The monologue is well written and is excellently played by Yootha Joyce. It has only one defect: it is totally irrelevant to the story. For the rest, Clayton strains for muted meanings by taking us on extended tours of the furnishings of various rooms.

Clayton suffers from a prevalent directorial disease (shared by André Cayatte and Leopoldo Torre Nilsson). He has filmmaking gifts as such but is markedly unreliable in his judgment of material. Some directors choose feeble material out of desperation. (After I saw Karel Reisz's poor version of *Night Must Fall* [1964], I asked a well-known director why, after the opportunities opened up by *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* [1960], Reisz had chosen to re-make this old thriller. "Probably he just waited too long," said the director sympathetically, "and got panicky.") Often it is simply weak editorial ability. It is increasingly clear that this ability and directing talent do not necessarily go hand in hand.

There are a few directors who make films as many other artists work—that is, as expressions of an organic vision of life, perhaps a philosophy. That is why one can forgive most of Ingmar Bergman's lapses; they are usually attempts, however unsuccessful, to dramatize an evolving personal view. But most directors simply shop for usable material, from film to film; and some of the most capable, like Jack Clayton, make some of the worst choices.

***The Leather Boys*, Sidney J. Furie, 1964** (*The New Republic*, 20 November 1965)

A film that will certainly not cause a verbal outpour is *The Leather Boys* (1964), an English picture directed by Sidney J. Furie. It is much too conventional in manner, and in the aims of its story and characterization, to be a cause of critical *causerie*. Yet, although it promised little, in subtlety and relevance I found it quite rewarding.

A cockney boy and girl, only in their mid-teens, get married. The boy, who has a motorcycle, runs about with a bunch of young cyclists, and for a time it looks as if this is to be a London version of *The Wild One* (1953). But soon it is clear that the purpose of Gillian Freeman's script, from a 1961 novel by Eliot George, is quite different. The married couple are still really children. She, though a wife with fancy hairdos and sex urges, is still a peevish child. Her husband shies off from her and from sex, not because she is repugnantly selfish (she is) or because he is homosexual (he isn't) but because emotionally he is still very much pre-puberty and wants to behave like a boy. When they quarrel and separate, he pals up with a knowing, patient homosexual (extraordinarily well played by Dudley Sutton). When at last the boy finds out the truth about his friend, there is a good, absolutely tacit scene of compassionate but firm parting. The marriage may possibly start again.

The film is a small, solid statement of a widespread modern trouble—the asynchronism between emotional maturing and the increased restlessness and sexual opportunity connected with increased gadgetry: the motorcycle (for example) as a symptom of that restlessness and a chance to do something about it. *Furie* uses too many slow dissolves and tends to add one shot too many to a scene. (In a reconciliation scene on a bench in the country, the last shot over the couple's heads and down the slope takes us out of the moment and into the movies.) But in the pertinences of the picture—feeling for his characters, exploitation of milieu—*Furie* does well. The episodes in the ugly café, on the road, at the Butlin holiday camp, are all properly horrible. Colin Campbell, the boy, is sound if a bit sweet. Rita Tushingham, except that her drunk scenes are thoroughly amateurish, succeeds remarkably in *thinking* like a sixteen-year-old twerp.

A well-known work in the American underground cinema, *Scorpio Rising* (1964) by Kenneth Anger, also deals with motorcyclists, and through the intercutting of a soppy old film about Jesus and of some explicit homosexuality, depicts the place of the cycle and its worship in modern mythology. It is a moderately effective film, thus a *magnum opus* in the Underground. But without any of Anger's artistic furbelows, with squarely conventional structure and techniques, *The Leather Boys* makes the same points and more. In portraying this contemporary choler, *Furie* is better than Anger.

***The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1964** (*The New Republic*, 26 March 1966)

Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was born in 1922, is an eminent Italian novelist, poet, film writer, and film director. He is also a Communist. At the Venice Film Festival

a year and a half ago, when I first saw his film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), there were Catholic and neo-fascist pickets outside the hall protesting that this atheistic Red had dared to sully this sacred subject. When Pasolini was introduced before the showing, as every director is, some well-rehearsed agitators in the audience jumped to their feet and started blowing whistles. They were ejected, but more trouble was foreseen. Then the picture started, and everybody shut up. Eventually the film won, among other prizes, the International Catholic Film Office Award.

Pasolini, the atheistic Communist, had beaten his opponents by making the best film about Jesus in cinema history. He has not given us a Marxist or merely humane Jesus; this is Matthew's Jesus. It might have been expected that Pasolini would act on Rousseau's advice: "Get rid of the miracles, and the whole world will fall at the feet of Jesus Christ." This film does not "get rid" of the miracles. Pasolini has woven them, seamlessly, into his earthy film. That is one of his triumphs.

In his novels Pasolini is particularly noted for his use of Roman dialect and low life. (Fellini called on him to do some of the dialect dialogue in *The Nights of Cabiria* [1957].) *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962), two previous films of his that I saw in Italy and which have not been released here, deal in blunt terms with a Roman criminal and a whore. His film about Jesus has in a sense a spiritual connection with those two previous films, through his conviction (more Christian than Communist) that, if one believes certain basic principles, then no one—not anyone at all—may be rejected or despised. His technique here is the same as in those earlier works both in cinematography and direction—the naturalistic, *cinéma-vérité* approach. The film looks like a quasi-documentary; none of the actors wears make-up, the lighting is often blunt, the film sometimes grainy. The location he chose is rocky Calabria in southern Italy. Some of his actors are recognizable from his earlier gutter films. (Herod is a man who was some sort of hood in the first picture.) Most of the cast are non-professionals. Natalia Ginzburg, the novelist, is Mary of Bethany. Most persons in smaller parts and the extras are, in the neorealist tradition, craggy-faced peasants.

Jesus is played by a young Spanish student who satisfied Pasolini's two requirements: an El Greco face and no professional ambition as an actor. Mary the Mother is played by two women, a young one and an old. The older one is Pasolini's own mother, and before the eager analysts leap to tell us that Pasolini did this because he has subconsciously cast himself as Jesus, we can note that the single most piercing moment in the film is Mary's agony as she sees the cross raised—whether or not one knows that she is Susanna Pasolini.

The artistic sources of Pasolini's film are clear. First, he is following in the tradition of all those painters of the Renaissance and after to whom the Gospel

story was an event of their own lives and who used their family and friends and countryside to certify this fact. Second, he is continuing the Italian film tradition of neorealism, extending it for the first time (so far as I know) into the historical: to cut through the religiosity of previous film treatments of the story and to emphasize Jesus as Man—the Incarnation.

The paradoxical result is that Pasolini's frank, vernacular texture achieves the religious spirit. When painters stopped tacking gold plates on the backs of the heads of the Holy Family and the saints, those figures—with some exceptions before and after the change—became less iconic and more beatific. So with Pasolini.

There are a number of egregious technical shortcomings in the film. The dubbing of the dialogue—in Italian—is frequently noticeable, particularly in the case of Jesus. The editing is sometimes jagged. Pasolini overuses the zoom effect with his camera. The score is a hodgepodge of Bach, Mozart, Webern, Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and a Negro spiritual. The last is especially oddly used—"Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" as we see the Infant in Mary's arms. Herod's palace is a Norman castle in Calabria, and the Romanesque architecture is clamorously un-Roman.

After all of which, we come to the most important factor, on which the film stands and from which everything in it grows. Unlike any other picture on the subject that I know, this film by the Communist Pasolini was made for only one reason: love of Jesus. The effect of this utterly simple truth is overwhelming. It informs every moment of the picture and makes it, even when it is flawed or slow, an extraordinary experience.

Many, many felicitous touches could be noted. Some of them: the startlingly beautiful face of the gray-eyed, curly-haired Angel of the Annunciation. Herod's death, in the gray light, as his courtiers sit calmly around the walls watching his throes. The face of Jesus, grave, stern, compassionate, submissive to his destiny. The crucifixion (the first time I have really felt that the prime torture was the nails). The Dreyer-like shots of the Roman helmets. The elevation of the cross, swinging up toward us.

Yet, despite the abundance of beauties, the film is slow and undramatic—as any film about Jesus must be. First, there is the stumbling block of the sermons and lessons. What is a camera to do with them? In the Sermon on the Mount, Pasolini attempts to solve the problem by breaking it up into continuous shots of different places in different planes and lights, but it is still cinematically uncomfortable.

Second, there is the matter of basic drama. Bernard Shaw wrote in the preface to *On the Rocks* (1932):

I have been asked repeatedly to dramatize the Gospel story, mostly by admirers of my dramatization of the trial of St. Joan. ... Joan tackled her judges valiantly and wittily; her trial was a drama ready made. ... But Jesus would not defend himself. ... He went like a lamb to the slaughter. ... Such a spectacle is disappointing on the stage.

Shaw then goes on to imagine a splendid dialogue that *might* have occurred between Jesus and Pilate, but his seemingly cold-blooded professional point is well-taken and it applies equally to film. Each spectator brings with him some sort of attitude towards Jesus, of whatever shade of belief, but he also brings expectations of the film form as such. A film that is faithful to the story may satisfy his religious sense if he has any, as Passion plays have done for centuries; but it cannot satisfy his unconscious or conscious artistic expectations.

That fact will not, of course, stop future filmmakers from attempting the subject again and again. At least Pasolini's work, faults and all, will serve as a standard of honesty in motive and simplicity in art.

Major Dundee, Sam Peckinpah, 1965 (*The New Republic*, 17 April 1965)

As wars recede in time, they become entertainments; rather, as the immediacy of the suffering fades, the entertainment that is imminent in war can be more clearly perceived. A new film makes varying use of this well-tried truth.

The war in *Major Dundee* (1965) is the one between the States. He is a Union officer in charge of a fort in the New Mexico territory where a number of Confederate prisoners are kept. One of these is a captain who was a West Point friend of the major's, now a particular enemy. Dundee is also responsible for protecting the area from the Apaches. When he has to capture a chief, he is shorthanded, and he asks for Confederate volunteers. Under their captain, they agree, and agree not to attempt escape until the job is done: at which time, the captain swears he will kill the major.

This is familiar and welcome ground. John Ford and others have happily accustomed us to the cavalry troop as dramatic arena, with some nice primary-color polarities to keep matters humming in between the Indian battles. This script, by Harry Julian Fink, Oscar Saul, and Sam Peckinpah, begins traditionally and therefore well. Later, when the troop has pursued the Apaches into Mexico and the authors feel that romance is overdue, the story gets wobbly and slow, and only belatedly recovers. In its divagation we meet Senta Berger, who is precisely the Viennese widow of a Mexican doctor whom anyone would expect to meet, tending the wounded in a low-cut dress in a remote Mexican town. The producer's

wish to include Berger is very understandable; but credibility is not a component of her role. There is also a long drunken interlude while the major recovers from an arrow wound in another Mexican town, all of which seems to have been filmed and retained by mistake.

But most of the picture is dashinglly done, with that always appealing combination of realistic detail and romantic sweep. Peckinpah, who directed, was praised for a Western of several years back called *Ride the High Country* (1962), which I missed. But from this film it is easy to believe that the earlier one was good. He has an eye for action and for tension, and enough imagination to ring changes on the clichés of both veins. In addition he seems to have some understanding of actors. Charlton Heston, as Dundee, gives a much more acceptable performance than usual; and Richard Harris—an amusingly long way from Antonioni and *Red Desert* (1964)—plays the captain with fine cavalier panache. If his voice had better timbre and range, his future would seem bright. All the male parts are aptly cast; and, because of the special leatheriness of the leather and grittiness of the grit, mention ought to be made of the art director, costume man, and property master: respectively, Al Ybarra, Tom Dawson, and Joe La Bella.

Cat Ballou, Elliot Silverstein, 1965 (*The New Republic*, 22 May 1965)

Cat Ballou (1965) is in an ancient tradition of youth. It is a comic Western, and it mocks certain audience expectations in that vein, but its principal reason for being is just to let loose some youthful hell-raising on the screen. There have been several films in the last few years that attempted *jeux d'esprit*—*The Troublemaker* (1964), *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), *That Man from Rio* (1964)—and of this recent crop, *Cat Ballou* is the best American example. It lacks the surrealist light-heartedness of the Beatles film and the superb skills of de Broca, but its consistent determination to goose several golden geese keeps it generally amusing. Essentially it is not a satire of Western clichés, which are too easy—and almost too venerable—to satirize. It is simply a frolic with not many holds barred.

The year is 1894. At the start, the heroine, Cat (named in honor of Ian Fleming's Pussy Galore?), is in jail sentenced to hang. The film tells us how she got there: how, after finishing teachers' college, she returned to her Wyoming home to find her father, a small rancher, harassed by a giant land-combine that wanted to drive him out; how she and he and his young Sioux helper hired a famous gunfighter to oppose the combine's gunfighter. Two young bandits, whom she met on her homeward journey, also teamed up with her. To detail the plot would necessitate detailing the switches and surprises—to make clear that the plot is only an armature for

irreverences; and to do that would be to spoil the fun. Just one sample: after her graduation, the demure Cat is escorted to the crowded train for her trip home by her schoolmistress, who, for safety's sake, seats the girl opposite an upright young man in clerical garb. No sooner has the older woman left than the young man grins sleepily from ear to ear and says happily, "I'm drunk as a skunk."

In the best film in which she has so far appeared, Jane Fonda plays Cat and gives not quite her best performance, (Also, Jack Marta, the cameraman, seems not to have learned how to light her attractive but unusual face until the picture was well along.) Tom Nardini is pleasant as the young Sioux. Stubby Kaye and the late Nat Cole make a vigorous pair of balladeers who continually wander through. But the old catchphrase, "stealing a picture," is given new life by Lee Marvin's performances. He plays both gunfighters. The Bad One has a tin nose—replacing the one bitten off in a fight. The Good One is an alcoholic so liquid that only the right amount of booze—*exactly* the right amount—can sober him up. Burlesque, menace, stylish carriage, rubbery invertebrate stupor—all these and much more are easily in Marvin's grasp, contained in an incisively commanding presence. It is usually said of a virtuoso performance by a featured player that it will make him a star. I devoutly hope that will not be true here. Marvin is much more valuable with the freedom to come in as a non-star and cut great dazzling swashes around a film.

The picture's shortcomings resolve to some shortcomings in the director, Elliot Silverstein (a name new to me). At this stage of his career, his appreciation of wit seems to me more literary than theatrical and cinematic. He knows what is funny; he is less secure in making it funny on screen. The script by Walter Newman and Frank R. Pierson—from a 1956 novel by Roy Chanslor—is neatly wrought in shape and dialogue, and Silverstein is clearly in rapport with it. But his understanding and control of acting are shaky. Some of his casting is quite weak (the two young bandits, Cat's father); but even with these actors, and with Fonda, too, a director with a sharper ear could have sharpened the readings. Some of the lines are funnier than they sound. Additionally, Silverstein's visual powers—in movement and composition, in camera use—are at the moment quite ordinary. He is not yet in the company that, presumably, he wants to join: the line that includes Preston Sturges and Stanley Kubrick. But this film is so far above the commonplace that we can enjoy it while waiting for him to improve.

***Help!*, Richard Lester, 1965** (*The New Republic*,
25 September 1965)

We now have a second Beatles film. A small school has thus been established, and some aspects of it have been insufficiently noted.

In the history of sound films, the use of popular musicians—singers or players—as stars has usually meant the painful contrivance of plots to give musical opportunities, just as the worst opera librettos are only clotheslines on which arias and ensembles are pinned. But from time to time, imagination and character perception have intervened to dramatize the essential appeal of the stars. Several of Bing Crosby's earlier pictures—particularly the *Road* series with Bob Hope—are good examples. Musical numbers were featured, but the personalities of the performers were used with humor and fancy. We were entertained by seeing their images articulated, rather than merely displayed. For instance, in the 1941 movie *The Road to Zanzibar* (I think), Crosby and Hope are trapped in the jungle by attacking natives and fierce animals. They seem doomed. Then there's a sharp cut—to the pair sauntering casually down a road; and one says to the other, "Well, we'll never tell how we got out of *that* one." It was not only funny, its airiness gave exercise to the Crosby-Hope *personae*.

Now the Beatles have come along—a hypermania—and any film producer lucky enough to get their names on a contract could have made millions simply by having them do eight or ten numbers in front of a nailed-down camera, connecting the numbers with some trumpery story that no fan would have minded. The millions continue to accrue, but—seemingly because of the director, Richard Lester—a quite different approach was used. Lester obviously knew something of the four youths and liked them, and his liking of them was the starting point of the film. *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) made us like them, too. It had virtually no plot; it was a fictitious documentary of the group, as told by Lester—which is to say, with teeming cinematic deftness and high spirits.

But there was more than this in the picture because there is more in the Beatles than their likeableness. As individuals and as a phenomenon, they are quick shorthand symbols of youthful irreverences: contemporary dislike of contemporary fakes and perennial youthful dislike of low spirits and the fact of age. *A Hard Day's Night* became a light scamper across the sententiously furrowed brow of phony seriousness and fake values, as well as a chance for the Beatles to be and show themselves.

The chief problem of the second film, called *Help!* (1965), is that the first one has been made. Luxuriation in the existence and resonances of Beatle-facts could not suffice a second time; a plot had to be used. Thus, almost automatically, this relegated the new film to a somewhat lesser place; but Marc Behm's story, as scripted by him and Charles Wood (who adapted Lester's *The Knack* [1965]), attempts to be as ridiculous and far-fetched as possible, so it is often successful. There are defects in the dialogue. Some of it—particularly that of two mad scientists played by Victor Spinetti and Roy Kinnear—is of that terse, referential,

quasi-literary kind (like Woody Allen's) that is funnier on paper or in monologue than in action. There are defects, too, in casting. Leo McKern, who plays a mad Asian priest, is an actor much more admired by others than by me. Particularly in comedy, his mutterings, frequent incomprehensibility, and air of near-smugness exclude me from the band of the faithful. As his lovelorn aide, Eleanor Bron seems inflexible.

Under these handicaps, for which he is presumably responsible, Lester operates as well as possible—which is still superior to anyone in this vein. He is still able, for example, to execute cinematic pirouettes for three or four minutes in Alpine snow that do nothing to advance the story and yet have loveliness, humor, relationship, and cumulation. I would guess that he expends great amounts of film to get some of the best shots of the boys: singing without performing—singing while they stare abstractedly down a beach or across an Alp. The Beatles are no less likeable than ever and still very lucky in their director.

The vein of the two Beatles pictures and their offspring (like John Boorman's *Having a Wild Weekend* [1965], featuring the Dave Clark Five) is not limitless, but these two so far are varyingly attractive. *Help!* does not emphasize, as did *A Hard Day's Night*, the element of bobby-sox hysteria. This hysteria is responsible for most of the publicity and money, but it by no means accounts for all of the *being* of this group, nor does it include all its public. (Adults and small children respond to these films as they never did, for instance, to Elvis Presley.) It is this fact that Lester and his associates have grasped and have used appealingly.

***Mickey One*, Arthur Penn, 1965** (*The New Republic*, 9 October 1965)

Arthur Penn's *Mickey One* (1965) is an example of a film by a director so anxious to make something unusual that he makes a mess. He started here with an absurdly conceived, badly written, dankly symbolic script by Alan Srgal—about a Detroit nightclub comic with huge gambling debts who hides out to save his life. (So he surfaces in Chicago! And goes back on the stage!) The intended overtones about our jungle society, about religion (Who *is* that up there in the spotlight booth?), about a mute artist who wanders through on a junk wagon, are all third-class Philip Barry.

Warren Beatty is never for a moment credible here as a professional comic but, in spite of some unintelligibility, is occasionally touching. Alexandra Stewart is dull as that sensitive Girl with Soul who teaches the tough guy the meaning of love. (I feel that this character, as such, is a missionary trudging from one picture

to another.) Hurd Hatfield tries to control the role of a nightclub boss, but the part splits asunder with a change of focus. Teddy Hart is pathetically affecting as an agent.

But Penn has duped himself. He has bought (in two senses) this script, in all its Chayefsky-Oboler-Pogostin poesy. Further, he has subscribed to the metaphoric fallacy that the most apt expression of American life is in the private-eye mode intensified; that the racketeer, the tough argot, the nightclub milieu are, essentially, *us*. They can be made to *be* us, as can any segment of our society if used artistically; but the *assumption* that they are us is what lames this picture primarily, and the error is compounded by the sophomoric symbolism that is pasted on. Unavoidably, there is a bastard ending; after a picture done in ultra-naturalistic settings, we finish with Beatty playing the piano against a theatrical backdrop of the Chicago skyline.

Penn has talent and serious ambition and seems to be moving towards a kind of expressionist film; but the more vivid his work here, the more futile, because the story and writing are so foolish. One senses that his use of this material is doubly bad because he saw it as a chance to strut his imaginative stuff, rather than—primarily—to serve a theme and some characters. If this is true, he has himself ordained the result: a bunch of images, some of them quite graphic, adding up to nothing.

***Repulsion*, Roman Polanski, 1965** (*The New Republic*, 16 October 1965)

In *The Crisis of Our Age*, P. A. Sorokin identifies three forms of art that, he says, have been cyclically successive through history: the ideational, which is concerned with abstract, usually religious ideas universally accepted in a culture; the idealistic, in which elements of the subjective and emotional are admixed with the former; and the sensate, in which the subjective takes over completely. His purpose is to understand our era, one of sensate art, and to explain the phenomena that can be included under the term “modern.” In this analysis he predicts (in 1941) “the morbid concentration of sensate art on pathological types of persons and events.” He later notes: “The professional character of sensate art, though a boon under certain conditions, turns, at its decadent stage, into a veritable malady.”

Both these statements have some application to Roman Polanski’s second full-length film, *Repulsion* (1965). His début, *Knife in the Water* (1962), disclosed this young Pole as a distinctive and extraordinary talent. His three-character film was a fascinating, if over-extended, Sartrean machine of self-inflicted torments.

His second long work confirms his talent in every frame, but it raises the question of whether his professionalism may be a malady and whether its focus on pathology may be, in a large sense, decadent.

The story is easily described: we see a mind going to pieces. A young French girl, living in London with her older sister, is left alone in their apartment while the sister goes off with her lover for two weeks. We know the girl is in mental trouble; the sister does not. When the sister returns, at the end, the apartment is a ruin; there are two murder victims in it; the girl is in her nightgown, hiding, in the darkened flat, under her sister's bed—which she knows has often been used for love-making—sucking her thumb, almost catatonic.

There are a few false touches. A scary death mask turns out to be a woman on a beauty-parlor table; a black-gloved hand that appears threateningly turns out to be the sister's. But with a sure sense of tempo (slow when it needs to be), with the power to make the girl's apparitions frighteningly real, with a visual selectivity that is always varied but never freakish, Polanski moves this picture forcefully down its ghastly road. The question that must be asked entirely seriously of such a serious talent is: Why?

All that happens in this film is that a girl becomes homicidally psychotic and that strong hints are given as to the reasons. (On at least two nights she hears her sister's moans and groans with her lover in the next room—complete aural pictures of intercourse. In the very last moment the camera concentrates on an early family photograph that, in ultra close-up, reveals the girl staring in mad love-hate at her father.) But more explicit documentation would have provided only greater clinical exactness, nothing else. There are two recent points of comparison, Nikos Papatakis's *Les Abysses* (1963) and Alain Jessua's *Life Upside Down* (1964). In *Les Abysses* an attempt was made not to detail medically the sisters' madness but to rhapsodize on it as a manifestation of evil. In Jessua's film the descent into schizophrenia was made a horribly beguiling pilgrimage to peace in a tedious-terrible world. Here there are no such implications; slice through the artistry of method, and all you find is that Polanski has got his facts right.

Further, *Repulsion* contains as horrifying a scene as I can remember, one that makes the eyeball-and-razor in Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou* (1928) and the shower murder in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) seem dainty. The landlord breaks into the barred apartment for his rent, is impressed by this pretty girl in her nightgown, and gets other ideas. She holds a straight razor behind her, and, as she permits him to embrace her, she slits the back of his neck. We see this close up. We see the stunned man look in the mirror and discover blood. We see her slash his throat again and again as he sinks from sight. It is horrible. There has been an earlier murder, which was gruesome enough (and reminiscent of Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* [1955]); it

pales by comparison. We are today supposed to be primed for and needful of the Artaudian experience—the purge through violence, instead of through pity and terror. If this scene was so intended, it produced no purge in me, only the repulsion of the title. My feelings were all with the victim, who seemed to be paying a monstrous price merely for wanting to bed an attractive girl, who received him in her nightgown in a dim room and whose illness he did not know of.

I hazard some guesses as to Polanski's motives for this film. First, professionally, he wanted to follow his well-received first film with a provocative second that avoided the frequent *Opus Two* letdown. Second, as to theme: He was brought up in an environment—Communist Poland—in which Freud is known but not numinous. Presumably he came to the subject of Freudian psychology relatively late in his still-young life and, like most converts, is liable to preach to the faithful. We remember the apocryphal remark of Pope Pius XII to Clare Booth Luce after an hour of her exhortation: “But, Mrs. Luce, I *am* a Catholic.” Well, Mr. Polanski, we are all Freudians—even (one may say) those who are not.

In the leading role Catherine Deneuve, an actress of unremarkable ability, responds well to direction and creates the childlike dream-in-life quality. John Fraser, though afflicted with poor dialogue, gets some feeling into the would-be fiancé. As the sister's lover, Ian Hendry subtly conveys his knowledge of the girl's polarized emotions toward him, even at the end when he lifts her rigid body. Along the way Polanski has cleverly sketched in a number of London character vignettes.

This film, so early in his career, cannot be taken as settling anything about his future, particularly when seen against his quite different first work. One can hope that it is not a first step down a path of essentially sterile, superb professionalism. Its larger relevance—because it is so purely clinical—is in another context: not of Polanski's career but of Sorokin's theory; as an instance of the morbid decline of sensate art. From Strindberg and Ibsen to the present it would be easy to trace a line in drama and fiction of increasingly intense concern with pathology, with many magnificent examples of the sick man as necessary hero and prototypal symbol, supporting the belief that an era of sensate art goes through a pattern. First, there is the period of recognitions (“Oh, that's just how we behaved on our honeymoon”); then the deck of laughter-and-tears cards is reshuffled and dealt, reshuffled and dealt. Then greater force must be found, as the audience's threshold of response rises or as artists grow tired of doing more or less what Dad and Granddad did. Added to that—in the current era of sensate art—is the social fact that the increasing constrictions of industrialized society have made grand emotional experience unlikely for most people.

All of these factors have caused artists to turn increasingly to pathology, as more interesting to them, more barometric of our atmosphere, more appealing

to audiences. Many of these works (like James Leo Herlihy's recent [1965] novel *Midnight Cowboy*) are well done and affecting. But taken *en bloc*, and viewed quite apart from moral considerations, even from the physical shock I have expressed, they very possibly represent the concluding of an epoch. Such a work as *Repulsion*—because of its excellences—may signify a drought of artistic possibilities, not of talent. It may signify that a revolutionary change is in the making, although it is not helping to make it. The tendency towards the impersonal in much of contemporary art may be less a symptom of dehumanization, as it is sometimes called, than an attempt to get away from both the laughter-and-tears circus ring and the viscerally exciting but often gratuitous plumbings of pathology: to move towards a new, refreshing, pertinent ideational art.

Morgan, Karel Reisz, 1966 (*The New Republic*, 30 April 1966)

Karel Reisz's new film *Morgan* (1966) is being shown in England under the title *Morgan—A Suitable Case for Treatment*. The latter title is much more appropriate. Not since Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* (1962) has such an arrant psychopathic case been presented in the guise of charm. The screenplay by David Mercer is about a young London painter named Morgan Delt. At least, we assume he is a painter. He is never seen painting, but an art dealer asks him for more pictures. On Morgan's return from a trip to Greece, he learns that he is being divorced by his rich upper-class wife, who wants to marry the art dealer. The film consists of Morgan's efforts to re-capture his wife after the decree *nisi* is granted and to prevent her second marriage.

This basic plot, reminiscent of Cary Grant-Irene Dunne comedies of the 1930s, is decorated with two elements. The first is animals. People remind Morgan of animals, which we then see. In key with this, his mother's boyfriend is a wrestler called Wally the Gorilla; Morgan keeps a life-sized stuffed gorilla in his attic; he crashes his ex-wife's wedding party in a gorilla suit; he also has King Kong fantasies. The second element is Communist cant. His cockney mother, who runs a café, is a loyal Party member, as was his deceased dad. Mum is full of slogans, and Morgan uses the hammer and sickle as a source of jokes.

This film has been hailed as a fine comedy. My objections begin with the fact that I hardly got a smile out of it. Worse, my failure to laugh needed no retrospective analysis and was never a mystery. Virtually from the start, I thought *Morgan* neither gamesome nor pathetic. At best, he is boorish and most of the time he seems mentally defective.

It is impossible to state precisely where farce of outrage stops being farce and becomes merely outrage. There are no lists of permissible and impermissible

acts. Tone and character, more than specific acts, constitute the difference. Here the wrong tone and an unappealing character operate from the outset. Morgan's pranks were never, for me, assaults on stuffy convention by a fetching social free-booter; they were the acts (as his wife says) of a spoiled child. And very little is more repugnant or dangerous than the ethics and values of a child in the body of a man.

His actions in his wife's house include multiple breakages, shearing a hammer and sickle in her rug, and planting dynamite under her bed, in the hope that she and her new friend will depress the plunger but instead trapping his (ex) mother-in-law. In some farce, like that in many silent films, physical violence is funny, but this is always in a world in which the non-violent material is first established as unreal and exaggerated. The cop's tin lizzie that crashes through the barn and comes out the other side with the farmer on the hood is driven by a cartoon cop and carries a cartoon farmer. *Morgan* is full of real people in a real world. The violence and destruction irrupt into a context that has the feel of high comedy. Therefore, instead of laughing at (for instance) the dynamite explosion, I thought: "Why not send for police or ambulance?" In fact, both arrive later on, thereby certifying retroactively that what happened was not funny.

When he kidnaps his estranged wife and carries her off to the remote countryside, it might have had the air of an extreme romantic action by a man in love, incompetent to deal with the world in worldly ways. What we get instead is an irrational, barbarous act, truly against the girl's wishes, not merely against maidenly demurral. Out in the country, he suddenly realizes the danger he has put himself in and says, "I'm frightened." Only then, after the man is melted and only the scared juvenile remains, does she pity him. This is neither romantic comedy nor knockabout farce; it is pathology.

The ending confirms this yet again. The girl, now remarried and quite pregnant, visits Morgan in the mental hospital and tacitly admits that the child is his. (He has stormed his way into her favors from time to time.) She and we leave him tending flowers in the hospital garden. Where is the frolic in having watched the antics and fantasies of a man who ends up in the asylum where he ought to have begun? Or do the filmmakers expect us to credit the tired convulsion that madness is the only sanity possible in this world? (Etc., etc., etc. ...)

Yet even this role, essentially clinical though it is, might have had some charm (as the woman in *Jules and Jim* so powerfully has) if it had been played by an appealing actor. David Warner, who was the unattractive Blifil in *Tom Jones* (1963), is not much more attractive here. He looks like a very rough draft of Peter O'Toole; but he has neither O'Toole's looks nor emotional effect nor careful comedy skill. His wife is played by Vanessa Redgrave, daughter of Michael, a large and lovely

young lady who supplies airiness, chic, and susceptibility in a part that does not require much more. Robert Stephens, an excellent actor, again has an inadequate film role as the art dealer and does not look well in it.

The chief disappointment is in Karel Reisz. This gifted film editor and teacher made a strong feature-film début with *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), then directed the disastrous remake of *Night Must Fall* (1964). Now comes *Morgan*, which seems to me a thoroughly strained attempt at a flight of high spirits, an arthritic leap into the blue that uses many familiar devices to help elevate it, nearly all of which fail. One can almost tick off the checklist of tired camera tricks and comedy components: stop-motion, hurried silent-film motion, the animal references, the policeman who plays “potsie” when no one is looking, the burly but good-hearted wrestler. Any potentially fresh point is carefully flattened by Reisz: for example, the use of Karl Marx’s memorial bust in Highgate Cemetery or the final sight gag, both of them dwelt on too long. It is all an attempt at ebullience by a man who has little of it in his nature. The effect is heavy and cinematically trite. Insofar as this film says anything at all, it utters a cry for help from the director of *Help!* (1965). Richard Lester, who also made the other Beatles picture (*A Hard Day’s Night* [1964]), and *The Knack* (1965). He would at least have given the texture some sparkle. But Morgan himself would have remained “a suitable case for treatment.”

***The Battle of Algiers*, Gille Pontecorvo, 1966**

(*The New Republic*, 16 December 1967)

“Not one foot” of newsreel is used in *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). The picture begins with that boast—quite properly, because the prime achievement of the director, Gillo Pontecorvo, is his reconstruction of events in the streets of Algiers between 1954 and 1962. This fact—that the revolution we see is entirely reconstructed—is almost incredible even while we watch. Actors are actors, but mobs are only people, and Pontecorvo has found a way to make the Arabs and the French reproduce their pre-liberation feelings in present-day Algiers. Similar films, like Nanni Loy’s *The Four Days of Naples* (1962), pale beside it; Pontecorvo used real and recent enemies. Bombings and killings are easy to control with sleight-of-eye (razor-thin editing that stops just before you see what you think you see—and then snaps on the dead bodies so swiftly that you are convinced you saw them shattered). It is the emotions of those milling French and Arab crowds that I kept wondering about. After the director yelled “Cut!”, then what?

Most of the film is deftly made. Time-lapses, those unavoidable nuisances, are handled succinctly with freeze-frames; the film simply halts, then resumes—and

the arbitrariness of the few seconds' pause serves as an almost Chinese symbol of the lapse of several minutes or hours. Pontecorvo's camera has moments of epic sweep, nicely contrasted with some claustrophobic scenes of hiding and conspiracy. The torture scenes brew up real horror because they treat the torture only as a method, not as sadism. Yacef Saadi and Brahim Haggiag are perfect as rebel leader and acolyte, and so is Jean Martin as the intelligently ruthless French paratroop colonel.

Further, Pontecorvo and his screenwriter, Franco Solinas, have insisted on presenting the struggle in balance. The French viewpoint is put quite rationally by the colonel. (The rebels have orders to remain silent, if arrested, only for twenty-four hours, to give their fellows a chance to change plans. Therefore a captured rebel must be made to talk quickly. Therefore torture.) The French people—including teenagers and babies—who are blown up by Arab terrorists are considerably more attractive to our eyes than the natives. (This is Pontecorvo's subtle dig at our race prejudice.) Pontecorvo even uses the same muted music when dead French are carried out of ruins that he uses when dead Arabs are carried out of other ruins. He unquestionably sympathizes with the freedom fighters, but he is also showing us that people are often put in oppressive positions by historical sequence and consequence, not by their innate villainy or their moral inferiority to the people under them.

And yet . . . , the film leaves us with central dissatisfaction. For one thing, why *not* use some newsreel footage, especially since most of the street scenes are made to look like newsreels? But more important, *The Battle of Algiers* never really tells us why it was made. What is Pontecorvo's real theme? Is he telling us that struggles for freedom always eventually succeed? (The hero is killed four years before liberation, but those four years are sketched in to complete, as it were, his story.) Or is he telling us that political action is cyclical and laden with futilities? (We see this story now through the prism of the fate of Ben Bella, the socialist soldier and revolutionary who was the first president of Algeria, from 1963 to 1965—only to be deposed in a military coup led by the army strongman Houari Boumédiène.) Neither view is quite clear, neither is done strikingly enough to make the picture more than a superior example of the resistance-film genre.

There is another issue, still more important. I saw *The Battle of Algiers* twice, once before and once after I saw Richard Lester's *How I Won the War* (1967), that brilliant work which is a symptom of a new moral epoch. Seeing Lester's film when I did helped to clarify something that had been bothering me about Pontecorvo's film and which came into focus as I watched the latter a second time. There is a pornography of grief, of horror, of resurrection of the grievous past—no matter how genuinely cruel the sufferings, how courageous the deaths, how

indebted we are to those who died. (Frédéric Rossif's documentary *The Witnesses* [1961]—composed principally of German footage shot in the Warsaw ghetto in the early 1940s—is another example of this pornography.) It is not a matter of forgetting either heritage or obligations. It is a matter of the point—the *present* point—of resurrecting the past. To wallow in past sufferings, to insist on counting and recounting our hoards of wrongs and grievances, is to sentence ourselves to a repetition of the past. And that is no longer a sane option. Marx's most famous dictum is that historical events occur twice: once as history, the next time as farce. The dictum is now dubious; because the next time a large-scale war occurs, the farce will be enjoyed by some other planet.

So the really pertinent question in Pontecorvo's film—sharpened and pressed home by Lester—is: how can men now take moral action without violence? For centuries sane and just men have loathed violence and tried to avoid war, yet for centuries the point has come when even sane and just men have felt that they had to fight. How can oppression now be resisted, or annihilation halted (as in Israel), when every small war is a possible invitation to the Last War? New methods and scourged moralities are needed—at least what we *don't* need is sentimentality about the past, particularly the recent past in which many of us are emotionally knit. Films that re-create this past merely to revel in sufferings and triumphs, such films involve a sensual, obscuring self-indulgence that is pornographic. Lester shows us this consciously, Pontecorvo unconsciously.

***Death of a Bureaucrat*, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1966**

(*The New Republic*, 2 June 1979)

The Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea is a peculiar disappointment. He was introduced to the United States with his fifth feature, *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), a fascinating and perceptive film about a Cuban bourgeois intellectual adjusting to the revolution. Last year we got Gutiérrez Alea's seventh feature, *The Last Supper* (1976), a heavy-handed historical grotesquerie about slavery, intended to prefigure the revolution.

Now we get his fourth feature, *Death of a Bureaucrat* (1966), made a year or so before *Memories of Underdevelopment*, a farce about the bureaucracy of the revolution. It is an utter failure. The plot deals with red-tape difficulties in re-burying a corpse that had to be exhumed in order to retrieve a work-card that had been buried with it. The whole film looks as if it had been planned by a committee formed by the Film Ministry to prove that Communists have humor. The very least the director might have done was to find a leading actor—a farceur, if

possible—distinguishable from the corpse he is trying to bury. And the many homages to Laurel and Hardy, to Harold Lloyd and others, might have been less obstreperously nudging.

Now that we've seen dim pictures made before and after Gutiérrez Alea's good one, it's time to wonder whether the good one was a happy accident, the kind that sometimes occurs in a mediocre artist's life. Maybe *Memories of Underdevelopment* is to Gutiérrez Alea what *Carmen* (1875) was to Bizet.

***The Comedians*, Peter Glenville, 1967** (*The New Republic*, 2 December 1967)

The Comedians (1967) is a film about doomed lovers, but it is also a genre film, in fact. Graham Greene films are too few to make as solid a genre as Westerns and gangster films, but they are as instantly recognizable. *The Comedians* is the real thing, chock-full of Greenery.

Check the recognition-points. The setting is a rundown country with corrupt politics (here Duvalier's Haiti, instead of various African countries, Indochina, or Mexico). The hero is God's sinner—not actually a defrocked priest (although that phrase is used about him) but a swoopinglly lapsed Catholic. There is an adulterous love affair that ends with heartbreak. There are wicked politicians and policemen who are quite articulate about their wickedness. There is even a suggestion of the apostolic succession of martyrs at the end (as in Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory* [1940]). Everything is in order, especially because the hero is Richard Burton, who is never better than when glamorously radiating self-disgust.

Also, it is Peter Glenville's best piece of film direction—a compliment that can be measured against such dismal past work as *Summer and Smoke* (1961) and *Becket* (1964). The film ambles along, without much trace of style or imagination, but at least this time Glenville does not actively impede it. Glenville is not entirely helped by the screenplay (Greene's own), which seems to end about three different times, nor is he himself able to help Elizabeth Taylor. She plays the German wife of a Latin-American diplomat, and is the innamorata of a scruffy hotel-keeper (Burton). In this film, made in color, the most remarkable thing about Taylor is that she looks like a tawdry picture-postcard of herself: her eyelids are so blue, her lips so red, her cheeks so pink, et cetera, as far as the censor allows.

But to give Glenville his due, if he has been unable to make Taylor look like anything but the stoutish star of an amateur theater, he has got an unusually valid performance out of the tricky Peter Ustinov as her husband and the first restrained performance I have seen by James Earl Jones, as a rebellious Haitian

doctor. Roscoe Lee Browne is winning and delicate as a Haitian gossip columnist, and Alec Guinness is seedily sharp as a fake ex-major. A bumbling American couple, Paul Ford and Lillian Gish, are tiresome, but then those characters—two sillily innocent, overbearing American tourists (elder cousins of the pair in *Two for the Road* [1967])—are tiresome before they enter. On balance *The Comedians* is not remotely in the same sphere with its author's best films, like *The Third Man* (1949)—not even with *The Heart of the Matter* (1953)—but it's pleasant to spend two hours again in Greeneland, still well-stocked with bilious minor crucifixions, furtive fornication, cynical politics, and reluctant hope.

***In Cold Blood*, Richard Brooks, 1967** (*The New Republic*,
6 January 1968)

Headlights gleam out of the dark, a jazz-beat thrums on the soundtrack, and the film of *In Cold Blood* (1967) is off in a cloud of commonplaces. The director, Richard Brooks, who also wrote the screenplay derived from Truman Capote's 1965 book, has often been drawn to literary works of merit—from *The Brothers Karamazov* (film, 1958) and *Lord Jim* (film, 1965) down to *Elmer Gantry* (film, 1960) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (film, 1958). In each case, he has applied the requisite amount of higher-browed commercialism, and in at least one case—*Lord Jim*—he came up with a pretty good movie. I am one of the minority who think that the Capote work belongs on that small shelf of enormously overpraised American books of the last decade, along with James Gould Cozzens' *By Love Possessed* (1957), Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools* (1962), and Mary McCarthy's *The Group* (1963), but I thought that *In Cold Blood* might make a good film. Shorn of its purple patches and endless superfluous detail, it might have marched relentlessly from its four private murders to its two public murders. It needed the steely oil-lock precision of John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle* (1950) or the compassionate horror of André Cayatte's *We Are All Murderers* (1952). Dilutions of these qualities seep through Brooks's film occasionally, but in general it manages to be both banal and desperately tricky.

Partly this is Brooks's own mediocrity, partly it is (I think) because of his response to the book's shortcomings. Some instances of the first: Brooks relies much too readily on the clichés of gangster films, like the flows and ebbs of bickering between the two killers, which though largely factual are made to seem hackneyed fiction because of the director's derivative approach. He shows the same movie-izing touch in his handling of place: he shot much of this film on location in Kansas, and he manages to make real buildings—homes, courtrooms, etc.—look

like studio sets. The psychological flashbacks to “explain” Perry Smith—none of which is done for Richard Hickock—are pedestrian, and the subjective touches are Kansas corn. (On the gallows Perry sees his hangman, for a moment, as his father.) The editing is burdened with equally corny matching shots: we cut from Farmer Clutter shaving to Perry shaving, from a woman’s scream to an ambulance siren, from a cigarette butt tossed into a river to a drag-magnet plopping into a river.

For the second matter, there is the fundamental subject of *point*. I deplored the lack of it in my review of the book in *The New Republic* (January 22, 1966), and the iteration of the word “existential” in other reviews did not console me. Clearly Brooks also saw this lack in the book. It is possible that the early Huston’s coldness or Cayatte’s empathy or the rarified view of Robert Bresson in *Pickpocket* (1959) might have made the film version a kind of god’s-eye view of foolish, futile human behavior, but Brooks has neither the vision nor the ability to compensate thus for Capote’s shortcomings. Instead, Brooks scrabbles for pat moralistic apothegms. At the gallows a young reporter asks an older one whether he knows the hangman’s name. The facile, sardonic answer: “We the people.” And after the executions, the old reporter says, with stage rue, “Maybe this will help to stop it.”

That young reporter is worth comment. In the prison sequence I found myself wondering, “Where’s Capote?” He had visited the killers often in prison and had been present at the hangings. Brooks evidently anticipated the question and put in this unnamed, sleek-haired young man as vicar.

The score by Quincy Jones is bombastic and tries painfully to supply excitement when little is apparent on the screen. The film’s main assets are the performances of the killers: Robert Blake as Perry and Scott Wilson as Dick work hard to give credibility to this strangely fictitious quasi-documentary. There is also a good grizzled and sodden vignette of Perry’s father by Charles McGraw.

***The Bride Wore Black*, François Truffaut, 1968** (*The New Republic*, 13 July 1968)

The backwards-thinkers are at it again. If anyone else had done *The Bride Wore Black* (1968), it might be seen as a cleverly made, thoroughly dumb, banal murder-thriller—senseless but with some nice camera touches and acting. However, François Truffaut directed it, and besides being Truffaut, he is also the “author” of a book-length interview with Alfred Hitchcock; so this film is not a commercial job that Truffaut did to keep alive on the screen, it is his “homage to Hitchcock.” Hitch-cock-and-bull. Whatever is good in it—very little—is much more Truffaut than Hitchcock.

Raoul Coutard did the (color) photography, so one knows in advance that the film will look lovely, although even Coutard cannot keep the rapidly aging Jeanne Moreau from looking as if she had just boxed ten rounds and lost. Charles Denner is in it (as an amorous painter), so we know that at least one role will be well played. And, admittedly, since Truffaut directed it, we know the film's movement will not be pedestrian. The best scenes—like the ones in the painter's studio—are reminiscent of his much better crime film *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960). The story, from a 1940 American thriller by William Irish (a.k.a. Cornell Woolrich), is about a woman who hunts down and kills the men who, quite without premeditation, caused the death of her bridegroom. Insofar as we feel anything about this picture, our sympathy goes to some of the woman's victims.

***Oh! What a Lovely War*, Richard Attenborough, 1969**

(*The New Republic*, 18 October 1969)

Oh! What a Lovely War (1969) is an anti-war film, British, made from a successful theater piece, fanciful—and disturbing in an unintended way.

Oh! What a Lovely War, produced on the London stage by Joan Littlewood and then brought to New York, was adapted for the screen by—whom? Nobody is named on the credit sheet. The film is an attempt to render the political chicanery and military blunders and still-incredible slaughter of World War I through the medium of a seaside entertainment. The aim is an ironic, macabre vaudeville. It begins with the heads of European states in 1914 strolling around an airy pavilion, then it glides to a boardwalk and a marching band that leads us to an entertainment pier, and the show is on.

There are period songs and newer songs with new words, and there are many interludes of trench warfare. I'm told that the stage original, which I missed, was almost entirely vaudeville; here there are fully two strands, and they will not mix. A sequence in which General Sir Douglas Haig leapfrogs over some officers' backs (as per an old song) might be good surrealist comment in itself, but sandwiched between straight mud-and-blood scenes, it is undigested and indigestible. The most successful mad sequence for me—and it must be looked at out of context—is a front-line church service in which the padre sings the proper words to a hymn while the soldiers bellow other words.

Laurence Olivier supplies a good cartoon of that incredible ass with incredible power, Sir John French. (French was the model for C. S. Forester's little-known, bitter novel *The General* [1936].) Richard Attenborough, who has steadily been improving through the years as an actor, makes his directing début here, revealing little more than some feeling for camera motion. In one traveling shot down a line

of weary soldiers, Attenborough pays homage to a similar shot of Dunkirk evacuees from a film that he was in—Noël Coward’s *In Which We Serve* (1942).

But even if the disparate elements blended and we could concentrate on the whole instead of being distracted by the parts, the effect would be more irritating than moving. What is the point of this picture? To tell us that war is horrible? To tell us some of the special horrors of the most ruinous war in Western history? To tell us that we are at the mercy of the ambitions of statesmen and generals? All worth repeating, perhaps, even though familiar, but not with any hint that the victims are in any way superior to the victimizers; the victims are only less lucky. This is one more safe, flattering little anti-war film, a smug little exercise in mordant righteousness, after which we can all go on living our lives exactly as they were, in the same national states. One reason that, for example, Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) is better than this film is that it will not let the audience feel superior to what it is seeing.

***Women in Love*, Ken Russell, 1969** (*The New Republic*, 18 April 1970)

The number of times that fine fiction has been made into good film can almost be counted on your fingers; and you won’t need another finger for *Women in Love* (1969). Still, some of the cinematic elements are remarkable.

The screenplay is, inevitably, the least successful of those elements. It was written by the producer, Larry Kramer, and it sniffs out the “action” the way those French pigs are supposed to sniff out truffles. There are snatches of discussion left in the script, but the balance is in favor of dancing and lovemaking and swimming and sledding. Certainly all those things are in the book and certainly a film lives by motion, but the balance is quite different in the book, where the action exists for the sake of self-discovery and thought. The crucial chapter in the book, the conversation when Ursula goes alone to Rupert Birkin’s house for tea, is reduced to a snippet, yet Kramer retains—unexplained—nutty old Mrs. Crich and her dogs. We get a syllabus tour of the novel until we arrive at the last section, in Switzerland, where a whole new picture seems to start and to go on at length, because the transformations in Gerald Crich and in Gudrun are even more difficult for Kramer than they were for Lawrence.

Gerald is played by Oliver Reed, one of the film’s best choices. The character is an unsatisfying one, to begin with. Lawrence modeled this turbulent, idealistic, unconsciously homophile man at least partly on J. Middleton Murry (ironic because Lawrence presumably didn’t know that Murry was having an affair with

Mrs. L.), but the model was insufficient. Reed works hard and well to realize the part. He is growing as an actor. He carries himself with increasing seriousness, without the oily smug sexiness of his first films, with an interest in inner complexities and a growing ability to substantiate them.

But Alan Bates, as Birkin, is once again Alan Bates. The film's best chance for success lay in the casting of this role. The actor of Birkin might have supplied some complexity to compensate for the thinning of the original material in the script. Bates is a smooth, silky actor with some schoolboy honesty and mild intelligence but no mystery and no conviction of pain. There is just one moment when he touches Birkin depths—at the *al fresco* luncheon where he eats a fresh fig and discourses about sexual parallels. Otherwise, just a pleasant young leading man.

Jennie Linden, an actress new to me, plays Ursula with wit and passion, and her film début once again demonstrates the English miracle of producing young actresses in command of style. Glenda Jackson plays Gudrun, originally the younger sister, though that relation is not credible here. Jackson is a very fine actress, but she will probably never be a box-office star because she is not interested in star “sympathy,” either in the parts she chooses or the way she plays them. She is not an actress in order to be loved but in order to act. Her Gudrun catches the buried wildness, the appetite for self, of this New Woman.

The costumes by Shirley Russell are wonderful, just sufficiently dramatic. The settings by Luciana Arrighi insist just sufficiently on their presence. And the color photography by Billy Williams is lush. Overly lush, I think, in wheat fields and woods. The director, Ken Russell, was evidently out to make Nature “perform.” The wheat fields are so golden, the pine-woods so healthy, that there are uncomfortable Beautiful reminders of *Elvira Madigan* (1967). Russell is also nervous about “cinematizing”: he throws in superfluous fancy dissolves, mirror shots, a sideways sequence, and other evidences of insecurity. A pity, because when he faces his material straight on, he shows talent for human revelation and for the camera motion dictated by it. The dance sequences—spoof Russian ballet and Dalcroze—are nicely handled, and the nude wrestling scene between Birkin and Gerald Crich is done with tact, stated but not exploited, so that it supplies the homophile element that disturbs, in differing ways, all four principals.

Lawrence's novel—whole-souled, often beautiful, sorely imperfect—is his largest inquiry into the opportunities and burdens of new freedom, with its men and women trying to understand more about love and sex and affinity. But it depends, for its continuing validity, on its moment in social and artistic history. It depends on its *form*, as a novel published in 1920, for that validity. It is as a 1920 novel that the freshness of it, such as it is, remains fresh. Restated, in someone

else's new medium, the themes now seem somewhat dated—even if it were possible to make a good film of a novel whose life is in its thought.

Kes, Ken Loach, 1969 (*The New Republic*, 3 October 1970)

Kes is about a boy in the present-day English mining town of Barnsley. He is a working-class child who captures a small hawk, a kestrel—which he calls Kes—and who trains the bird according to a book on falconry. So *Kes* is about the training of a wild creature by a civilized one.

Kes trades on a predictable and assumed series of emotional responses. An abused, misunderstood, stubbornly independent boy; a bullying older brother; a negligent and ineffectual mother; cruel schoolmates and tyrannical teachers; and a wild-animal pet for the boy: Is there anyone who couldn't take those elements and write the script? Is there anyone who doesn't know in advance that the boy's passion for the hawk is both an emotional outlet and a symbol of his own soaring spirit? Is there anyone who doesn't know that the mean older brother will kill the bird? But probably few of us would have had the nerve to make the brother kill the bird just at the moment when the boy finishes school and is about to enter the imprisoning, humdrum world. *The Yearling* (film, 1946), *The Red Pony* (film, 1949), *My Friend Flicka* (film, 1943), and all you other odes to the kinship of child and animal spirits, meet *Kes*.

In fact, the film would be better if it held more to the patterns of past animal films and gave us more of the bird than the boy. The bulk of the picture is padded with trite classroom episodes, a school football game featuring a martinet of a coach, scenes in the headmaster's office—a proletarian view of Lindsay Anderson's *If...* (1968), though not nearly as well done.

The boy is played by a Barnsley youngster named David Bradley, scrawny and completely credible. The script was written by a Barnsley man named Barry Hines and was directed by Ken Loach, who made such an imitative botch of *Poor Cow* (1967) a few years ago and now makes a less flashy but unimproved botch of this film. The best element is not the bird-symbolism but the earthy Yorkshire quality—the conviction that has been put into the depiction of Barnsley, including the sometimes impenetrable Yorkshire accent. The film's bona fides, so far as they exist, lie in that authenticity. The most moving moment for me had nothing to do with boy or bird, it was the scene when the bullying, hateful older brother gets into the mine elevator to go down to the pit where he will spend the day. This scene made it easy to understand why, when his kid brother disobeyed him and cheated him of some money, he took his revenge by killing the creature that soared in the sky.

The Little Theater of Jean Renoir, Jean Renoir, 1969

(The New Republic, 25 May 1974)

The Little Theater of Jean Renoir (1969) was made for French television in 1969 and has just been released in the United States. It was written, produced, and directed by Jean Renoir when he was seventy-five. His “little theater” contains three playlets and a musical interlude, each of which is framed by a theater-proscenium introduction and the falling of a curtain at the end. A small puppet theater stands on a table, itself on the stage of a theater. Old Renoir stands next to the table and acts as *compère*. After his introduction to each piece, the camera moves “inside” the puppet theater and the playlet begins.

The first, “The Last Christmas Dinner,” is based on a Hans Christian Andersen story. An old hobo couple, husband and wife, dine happily in the snow on a capricious handout from rich people who are not happy, then the old pair go to sleep in each other’s arms forever. The second, “The Electric Floor Waxer,” is an opera, with score by Joseph Kosma, in which grandiose music, including choruses, is affixed comically to a housekeeping crisis. Then comes the interlude—a song by Jeanne Moreau. Then comes the third and last playlet, “The King of Yvetot” (a.k.a. “A Tribute to Tolerance”), which is the title of an old song about a lazy king. A wealthy old Provençal husband with an adoring young wife takes in a young doctor to live with them and shun work. The wife and the doctor become lovers; the husband, fond of both and too lazy to be angry, is reconciled to a cozy triangular existence.

The whole film is something of a bundle of reminiscences. One of Renoir’s earliest films—*The Little Match Girl* (1928)—was based on Andersen and ends with smiling death in the snow. Some of these actors have worked with Renoir before, as has Kosma, and he has used the theater-frame device before. The old-fashioned feeling of the picture comes less from the absence of modern editing and camera dynamics than from deliberate return to *passé* points of view: the fairy-tale artifice of the first episode with obviously false snowflakes; the comic cinematic discomfort of large operatic gesture in the second episode. And the last episode returns to the warm South that figured so large in French films of the 1930s—Renoir’s *Toni* (1935) but especially *The Baker’s Wife* (1938) and *Harvest* (1937), which were directed by the man who had produced *Toni*, Marcel Pagnol.

This reminiscent atmosphere in *The Little Theater of Jean Renoir* promotes a feeling of ease. It’s a film made by a man who knows why he has chosen as he has and how to fulfill his choices. The picture feels almost as if it had been made before, as if it were a three-part play in a repertory and these actors were coming out to give yet another performance for a director whom they know well. Part of

this feeling comes from the fact that some of them do know Renoir well, part from the fact that the picture belongs to a familiar Renoir vein, and part from the fact that, without any conscious fervent adherence to principle, Renoir now can't help making films like Renoir—stylistically more so than ever, one might say. For chief instance, the theater-curtain device emphasizes again—as do some formal devices like the opera chorus and the final bow of the cast—that the deep-focus method for which Renoir is celebrated is really the amalgam to cinema of theater dimensions.

The trouble with this ease of fabrication is that now we see it as fabrication of another sort. The film's first episode deals with two deaths, the second with two deaths, the third with humiliation swallowed, and all this is treated as material for a gently smiling work of life-accepting warmth. I don't argue that death and discomfort must necessarily be grim, but I get the feeling that Renoir in this vein could make a film in a cancer ward with one wistful tear and a Gallic shrug at the end. Every nation has self-images that it sells itself. In France one of the popular self-delusions is that they are all broadminded and ruefully philosophical—*c'est la vie*, have a glass of wine, *mon ami*. Renoir is selling this rather hard throughout the film—to the French. Sad to relate, as he stood next to his too-cute puppet theater, he reminded me of the travel-poster Frenchness that Maurice Chevalier also sold to the French. In the past the least interesting Renoir to me was the Gallic-charm vein: *Picnic on the Grass* (1959), *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932). Much more interesting was the serious vein (which is not meant to charm): *La Grande illusion* (1937), *The Rules of the Game* (1939), *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* (1936). His last film—though he's still with us, it must be his last—is a valentine to his lesser self.

It contains one notably good, even courageous moment: Jeanne Moreau's *belle époque* song. She stands facing us, in costume, on a stage, and sings. (A fairish song.) The camera moves in and out once in a while but never changes angle. Moreau simply stands and sings. Not a movement, not a gesture; she stands and delivers. What composure. What command.

***Larks on a String*, Jiří Menzel, 1969** (*The New Republic*, 18 March 1991)

In 1969 the young Czech director Jiří Menzel finished a new film. It satirized Communist rule. The Soviets had invaded Czechoslovakia. The film was promptly locked up. In 1971, Josef Škovorecký, who had worked with Menzel previously, wrote: "The few who saw the film maintain that it is the best work Menzel has ever done." Now at last it has its American theatrical premiere (at the Film Forum

in New York), and if it is not Menzel's best work—his first feature, *Closely Watched Trains* (1966), is a firmer organism—it's a bittersweet delight. And of course it carries with it an aura of sanctity because of its history, or non-history, up to now.

Larks on a String is mostly set in a junkyard, in the early 1950s when Stalinism prevailed. To this yard all kinds of metal scrap are brought: automobiles, bedsteads, typewriters, large metal crucifixes. These items are to be melted down to make new steel for the new republic. Furthering the patent metaphor is the crew of men who have been put to work there—among them, a philosophy professor, a public prosecutor who believes in justice, a saxophonist whose instrument has been declared decadent. Also working in the yard is a crew of female prisoners—all young, all political—who are kept at a distance by a guard. Among the women is a particular beauty, quite shy. Among the men is a young cook, played by Vaclav Neckár, who was the youth in *Closely Watched Trains*.

Out of these characters, including the guard, Menzel and Bohumil Hrabal have spun a screenplay based on short stories by the latter. (A novel of Hrabal's was the basis for Menzel's earlier feature.) The first pleasant point about the picture is that the screenplay is light-fingered and ruefully funny—a scherzo on dark themes. (In retrospect, the picture's imprisonment for twenty years is almost part of the film itself.) Then there is Menzel's direction, never cute but always brimming with mocking naïveté, consciously wide-eyed without being cloying. He moves around that junkyard as if it were a field of daisies.

The actors complete the film's being with the right mélange of Middle European flavors: the mildly venturesome Neckár; the modestly frank young woman; the quiet ex-professor who comments on what happens as if he were a spectator, although his remarks, as he knows, will result in his own arrest; the guard whose marriage and marital misadventures counterpoint the central romance. All are actors in a grim comedy of an attempt to program human beings. (The title, I assume, refers to captive birds or to a hunter's catch.)

Toward the end, after a furtive courtship amid the metal scrap, Neckár and his adored are married—by proxy. She is still in detention camp. Then, just as she is released, he utters some irreverent remarks to a visiting fake-benign old dignitary, and he goes into the clink. Consummation of the marriage is still delayed by some months, but delayed consummations are part of the theme. (Furthered unwittingly by subsequent delayed consummation between the film and its audience.)

The color registration is not consistent throughout, but we're told that some scenes were cut by censors and had to be replaced with excerpts from the lone extant print. Still, if ever concessions are to be made to films, this is one of them. *Larks on a String* was begun in the period of the so-called Czechoslovak Film Miracle, from 1963 to 1969, but it was finished in a less miraculous era. The

irrepressible humor of Menzel and his colleagues, in the face of dreariness and worse, is as affecting as the film itself. I'm obliged to add that the little I've seen of Menzel's subsequent work is not up to the level of this film and his first feature.

***The Virgin and the Gypsy*, Christopher Miles, 1970**

(The New Republic, 1 August 1970)

The Virgin and the Gypsy (1970) is fairly faithful to the D. H. Lawrence original novella, from 1930, and is therefore fairly silly. This posthumous short novel, unrevised by the author, simplifies foolishly some of the themes used better in, among others, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and *Women in Love* (1920). The recent film (1969) of the latter was unsuccessful but at least it had some complexities to dally with. Here Lawrence uses the same opposition of warm blood and cold climate, the "poetic" urge battering at the cabbage-and-potato proprieties that still pertained in England after the First World War: but with what baldness and mechanics. And, as filmed, *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, directed by Christopher Miles, is a color-me-passionate primer, full of italicized symbols: the fumed-oak rectory imprisoning the repressed clergyman's daughter, the black stallion on which the handsome gypsy rides the countryside, the girl's first view of the dam as a crack in it is being repaired, the bursting of the dam that floods the virgin into the gypsy's arms, and so ludicrously on.

Still, putting the symbols aside, if that were possible, this faded story of life-hungry revolt might have made a tolerable period piece if the heroine had been well played. Joanna Shimkus is an Anglo-French Candice Bergen: a pretty girl who, by trying to act and failing, makes herself unpretty. Shimkus pouts, or doesn't pout, and has a thin, vapid voice that disintegrates if she has two consecutive sentences to speak. (And some of the things she has to say are horrendous. To a friend: "It's as you were saying the other day—life can be very difficult.") Franco Nero, the gypsy, has the asinine job of being the Male Principle incarnate; he tries earnestly, but sinks into repeated ruts.

In 1964 I saw a half-hour film in London called *The Six-Sided Triangle* (1963), made by Christopher Miles with his sister Sarah—six comic versions of a love story, an old revue idea and not very well done. Miles was being highly touted as a new talent; yet it took six years for us to get his first (as far as I know) feature. It has all the latest cinema lingo: lush color (as photographed by Bob Huke), dream and reverie sequences in slow motion without sound, exaggerated lyricism (why was the brief trip across the lake *so* dazzling?), lopping off scenes before they actually end to hurry things along. As is now customary with directors of British films set

in the country—particularly in the past—Miles gets the most out of stone bridges and old artifacts (a wooden coal scuttle, for instance), and their beauty has gone a long way to gain him credit for making a beautiful picture, which it is not. Young American directors have developed their own anonymous, interchangeable filmic patter, described by me in several recent reviews; young British directors are developing their equivalent, equally interchangeable among them. In both countries they represent the most deplorable aspects of the new film consciousness: linguistic cleverness and novelty as a substitute for flavor and commitment. How can you say I'm not an artist when I've just shown you this ingenious shot in the bedroom mirror?

At the end the ex-virgin goes off with a free-living lady named Mrs. Fawcett and the latter's lover, which the girl does not do in the book, thus cheering up Lawrence's tale of Anglican doom. In the film Mrs. Fawcett is not Jewish, which omits not only Lawrence's persistent anti-Semitism (he refers to her throughout the book as "the little Jewess") but his fascination with her as the outsider who can better afford to Dare.

***Husbands*, John Cassavetes, 1970** (*The New Republic*, 26 December 1970)

Husbands (1970) is *Trash* with clothes on. John Cassavetes has done yet another "cinéma non-vérité" film—about three thirtyish, wealthy New York Husbands, played by himself, Peter Falk, and Ben Gazzara. They go to the funeral of a contemporary, then get drunk and stay on a binge of some days that finally includes a trip to London. Presumably what we are seeing is panicked reaction to the first full intimation of their own mortality, of the end of options, the straitening of their lives. A good enough theme, though familiar, but Cassavetes has done everything he can to distend and muddy it, to falsify it with a sentimental reliance on artlessness to create greater Truth. As usual in these cases, the artlessness comes out merely as crude art.

His method, which he has used before in *Shadows* (1959) and *Faces* (1968), seems closer here in spirit to the Warhol-Morrissey method in *Trash* (1970): improvisation by actors on a storyline (to their own amusement, a good deal of the time), "free" shooting instead of planned shots, with a great deal of vomiting and sweating and tussling to make it good and gutsy. These are plushy suburbanites, instead of East Villagers, but the spiritual anguish is about as deep as in *Trash*. The only really interesting sequence is a fight between Gazzara and his wife.

Cassavetes has added a certain pulpiness to his visual quality, overripe color, squishy focus, enormous close-ups that make faces look like rotten fruit about to

drop. And he has evidently spent a great deal of time trying to cut and edit and arrange his “free” footage into the organic form it might have had more effectively if he had made the picture from a prepared script, with shots that were designed. For a time—and the time gets briefer as these pictures multiply—there is some small pleasure in the supposedly free form, but eventually I’m put off by the essentially sophomoric belief that this approach avoids artifice, more nearly approximates life, and really *utilizes* cinema. The real result is fun-and-games for some actors, deadly repetition of trite dialogue, fuzziness of points, and a seemingly last-minute attempt to put it all into the order with which it might have started.

As in his previous films, Cassavetes’ truth contains some arrant falsity. These three men latch on to two sets of three women in London as neatly as the separated husband and wife in *Faces* each found a partner for the night. And these three men, who go to London on the spur of the moment, acquire perfectly fitted wardrobes like *that*. RKO in 1935 couldn’t have arranged matters more deftly.

Nothing in *Husbands* is as good as Lynn Carlin’s performance in *Faces*. In fact, after the superficial candor evaporates, there is very little here at all; at very great length.

***Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*, Elio Petri, 1970**

(*The New Republic*, 23 January 1971)

This picture with the long title arrives from Italy decorated with several prizes and an epigraph from Kafka. They don’t help. *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (1970) makes strenuous efforts at allegorical resonance, but is fuzzy throughout and finally fizzles. Its subject is power, the worship and magic of power. The symbols are vivid and promising, but, as is often the case with allegory, they arrest more immediate attention than they finally justify. This fool’s-gold aspect of allegory applies to several arts but nowhere more than to film, where there is often an eager rush of gratitude for the mere attempt at seriousness.

The screenplay, by Ugo Pirro and Elio Petri, deals with a Roman police inspector, and begins on his last day as head of the homicide bureau, just as he becomes head of the political section. (Chords beginning to sound already? Just by the juxtaposition of those two terms? See how easy it is?) He has a mistress with whom he has often played the kinky sex-game of re-enacting various murders. This day he really murders her, and deliberately leaves clues leading to himself. His private frigid joke is to prove to himself that, just because he is who he is, police action will be paralyzed. The bloodhounds will refuse to believe their own noses because the trail leads to a person of authority and status. Add to the story that the

one person who knows the murderer's identity is a young revolutionary, and the allegory switches have clicked, the motors start to hum.

But it all burns out. First, because the script out-clevers itself. Not satisfied with all the potentially useful apparatus listed above, the authors insist further that the inspector is also impotent or at least sexually unreliable. This is supposed to show the even hollower hollowness of the power façade, I guess, but it sinks the symbolic ship. We wonder at once why this hot-breathing mistress wanted to play charades—was, in fact, the sex slave—of a man who couldn't complete the sex act. Worse, it ruins the allegory. It is one subject to show the magical effect of authority; it is quite another to show power as a substitute for sexual potency; and the two ideas battle each other.

But even with a consistent and developing script the film would flatten, because Elio Petri, who also directed, has become a man of flash and filigree. Some of his early work had simple, direct address, but the same curious thing has happened to him that has happened to two other Italian directors who, like Petri, are political radicals, Pasolini and Bertolucci: they have all moved from concerned art to arty concerns. Petri's last previous film, *A Quiet Place in the Country* (1968), was as sterile a farrago of audio-visual smartness as *Performance* (1970, with Mick Jagger). Here there are still traces of psychedelic whoring, but in addition, almost every sequence is lacquered with obtrusive egocentric pride in the way it looks. (The last shot through the lowering shutters, for instance.)

And the performance of the inspector, Gian Maria Volonté, is in quite the wrong vein. He is strident and vulgar, with no conviction of the cold pseudo-Nietzschean mind that would concoct such a scheme, with no steel edge in his tone. The part needed Mastroianni or Gabriele Ferzetti (from Costa-Gavras's *The Confession* [1970]) or Massimo Girotti (in Pasolini's *Teorama* [1968]). Volonté is just a coarse, bullying cop, and he helps a lot to put the picture at a far remove, where we see what was intended but what does not arrive.

***The Garden of Delights*, Carlos Saura, 1970**

(*The New Republic*, 3 April 1971)

In John Van Druten's *Voice of the Turtle* (1943), the hero discusses his preferences in drama and says he dislikes plays in which people go mad. The heroine asks, "What other kinds of plays don't you like?" He replies, "Plays about men who are paralyzed from the waist down." The protagonist of *The Garden of Delights* (1970) is not quite mad or paralyzed, but he is sufficiently daft and incapacitated to make the Van Druten prejudice live again.

Carlos Saura is a Spanish director whose previous film, *The Hunt* (1966), I remember for two reasons: someone in it was reading Ray Bradbury and all of them were being allegorical. No Bradbury this time, but even more allegory, with things being implied like crazy—and I mean crazy—about capitalism and class and impotence and sexuality and Spain and Europe and God and, probably, Einstein’s Unified Field Theory.

The scion of an immensely wealthy family has been injured in a car crash and now has difficulty remembering, speaking, and writing. He’s the only one who knows the number of a secret Swiss bank account, for the use of which they also need his signature; and the whole family is busily trying to restore his powers so that they can get their mitts on the money. Why other avenues to that account aren’t available to a family of their experience and resource, is not made clear.

It’s all sententious, with shots laboriously “well” composed and oppressively “well” photographed. The effect is as of Buñuel strangled with velour. Once the ground is established, there is not a trope that is unpredictable—with a single exception. I liked a scene in which the maimed man goes out in a rowboat with his oversolicitous wife and vainly tries to push her into the water, muttering “An American Tragedy” over and over.

In the main, however, this is a prime example of the delusion common to many Europeans—Canetti in the novel, Penderecki in music—that the heavier the art-apparatus, the better the art.

***Deep End*, Jerzy Skolimowski, 1970** (*The New Republic*, 18 September 1971)

Here’s how *Deep End* (1970) finishes: Jane Asher and John Moulder-Brown are in a huge empty swimming pool in a London public bathhouse, to which they have brought plastic garbage bags full of snow. They are now melting the snow with an electric tea-kettle in order to find a diamond that fell from Asher’s engagement ring when she struggled in a snowy park with Moulder-Brown (who’s fifteen). He finds the diamond, demands sex for it, and she pays; then when she tries to leave, he beans her. Water starts to flow into the pool—released by a janitor who, too, lusts for Asher—and Moulder-Brown clings to her body as they both sink and drown.

This “poetic” climax is as clumsily contrived to provide visual thrills as ever any corny old melodrama was contrived to provide chase thrills. So, like all of this picture, it has a strong whiff of the early 1960s when Bourguignon and Albicocco and Patroni-Griffi and the rest of the froth that followed the New Wave were cooking up situations to allow them to revel in the glory of “true” cinema.

Deep End was made by the still-young Pole, Jerzy Skolimowski, who in fact began work in the early 1960s. It's his first color film, was made in English, and deals with the passion of an adolescent bathhouse attendant for an older girl who works there. It's Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* (1911) once again—the despised lover who, we know, is more sensitive than the favored lover—only this time he and the doll both die. The symbolism of the bathhouse is patent; so are the colors. We even see walls being painted red as the passions hot up. (The idea of *Red Desert* [1964] trivialized into *Red Dessert*.) And, naturally, the camera very rarely stops circling and rarely gets out of someone's hands onto a tripod.

Jane Asher can best be described as an English girl on screen, nothing more. Moulder-Brown is something less than an English boy. Diana Dors, now fat, has the one good moment as a bath visitor getting kicks by grappling with the boy. The amorous swimming coach is smilingly played by Karl Michael Vogler, whom I saw in June as Hector Hushabye in Shaw's *Heartbreak House* (1919) in Hamburg. (Worth mentioning just for the quintuple alliteration.)

The dialogue is patently post-recorded. Words are synchronized with lips but not feelings or the right aural planes. We seem to be watching one film out of an emotional oven and listening to another out of a refrigerator.

Skolimowski started his career principally by imitating Godard; now, although there are traces of Truffaut and Antonioni, he seems lost without a model. Not an unbearable loss, I'd say.

THX 1138, George Lucas, 1971 (*The New Republic*, 10 April 1971)

A few years ago an American film student named George Lucas won an award with a short called *Electronic Labyrinth: THX 1138 4EB* (1967). He has expanded it into a feature (1971), in color, and the result is a classic instance of what is right and wrong with many American film-school graduates. Lucas has good eyes, if no original vision, and he knows a lot about film technique; but what he does with it all is thin. He has acquired a lot of skills but not much self.

Would you believe one *more* story about the dehumanized future, where people have numbers instead of names, where Big Electronic Brother watches all, where everyone wears the same white uniform and all heads are shaved, where the unseen State disposes as it will, and where the great sin is—hold on, now—love? The script by Lucas and Walter Murch almost has an arrogance toward the *need* to have a fresh idea.

Lucas has clearly made his bet on his cinematic display, and to his credit, he sustains interest on that score for about fifteen minutes. Disregard the collegiate jape of beginning with a Buck Rogers clip and then having the credits roll downward—as if this departure from rolling them upward made a particle of difference—and then we get a pretty good initial display of splintery quick editing, with blue filters, white-on-white figures, computer printouts, wall-size TV, capsule meals, robot policemen, and so on. All this is somewhat entertaining for a while, despite the derivations from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), despite the mimicking of Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) by using modern structures (garages, vehicular tunnels) as buildings of the future.

But Lucas would have to be one of the great geniuses of film history to hold us this way for ninety minutes, to keep us from discovering that he really doesn't have a clue as to why he made this picture, other than that he wanted to crack the whip at this cinema circus, and that he's patched together this old story as an arena.

Donald Pleasence is an opportunist of the future here and seems to spend his time wondering what the hell he's doing or meaning, looking guileful the while. Robert Duvall, as THX, has headaches quite a lot. Maggie McOmie, the heroine, has freckles. Together the trio do little to clarify and nothing to convince. Even the ending is meaninglessly upbeat. Suppose the hero did escape from the seamless underground world into the sunlight; how could he possibly hide from those super intelligences below?

"Shut your mind and open your eyes," films of this type suggest. "Nuts," is what I suggest in return. A great many good films ask us to keep our minds *and* eyes open; so why should we put up with this latter-day fiddle? Lucas has expanded his short, all right, and with some finesse, but he doesn't show that it was worth expanding.

***Taking Off*, Miloš Forman, 1971** (*The New Republic*, 24 April 1971)

Miloš Forman had an interesting idea in *Taking Off* (1971). He wanted to do a film about the generation gap that made its point primarily through pictures. The content of most films, particularly the ones with social themes, is usually conveyed in words and story. *Taking Off* has words and a story, of course, but they are only the scaffolding for the purely cinematic elements, which really state the theme.

Forman is a young Czech director (*Loves of a Blonde* [1964], *The Firemen's Ball* [1967]), now working in the United States. For a time, I enjoyed what he was doing here in this first American film of his, and I also had some of the same

feeling one gets from Victor Sjöström's or F. W. Murnau's American films in the 1920s: the odd sensation of seeing the very familiar as it looks to someone who is filtering his vision through different conditioning. The cinematographer was Miroslav Ondříček, who did *The Firemen's Ball* (he also did *If...* [1968] for Lindsay Anderson); between him and Forman, we get a sort of Middle European view of New York and suburbs. That is to say, we get a sense that this society is being observed as stratified and traditional, rather than flexible. An East Side luncheonette woman is a peasant, aloof and suspicious; the details of suburbia are displayed as caste marks, even when satirized; a bilked cab driver chases a nonpaying customer like a market-day stallkeeper.

Forman's chief cinematic device is the close-up, often done with a telephoto lens so that the naturalism is softened and surprised. He likes to shuffle faces in front of us like a prestidigitator with cards, and he does it often with faces that we see only once, using them to create his topography. He likes to intercut between sequences of close-ups, as when the parents of a teen-aged girl are worrying where she is, and their worries are intercut with close-ups of an audition for singers in the East Village, which the girl is attending. (Forman particularly likes close-ups of people concentrating on some effort: this audition sequence is like the beauty contest sequence in *The Firemen's Ball*.)

But *Taking Off* flounders. *Loves of a Blonde* had some good vaudeville skits in it, like the one with the boy in bed with his parents, but it was tenuous. *The Firemen's Ball* was so self-admiring of its quaint ways and character sketches that it soon bogged down in *Gemütlichkeit*. Forman's first American picture has just as much self-adulation and a less secure grip of its materials. The details are accurate enough in themselves, but they don't all fit together. (Two of his script collaborators were American but haven't helped on this point.)

The parents of the teenaged girl who takes off, for example, are a mixture of cornball suburbia and swinging suburbia. The father who gets drunk in a cheap bar is hard to connect with the swank man who goes to a hypnotist to cure himself of smoking. The daughter is sketched so loosely that we're apparently asked to supply her reasons for running off from our portable files on Youth Problems. At the end she brings her new boyfriend home to dinner, a fantastically successful hip musician. The father asks the youth to sing after dinner; youth demurs. Last shot is the father singing—"Stranger in Paradise"—with mother at the piano, to the young couple who sit on the floor watching impassively. This is funny in the abstract, incredible in the reasonably sharp father we have been shown.

There is absolutely nothing more to be "said" in films on the generation gap at the moment, and it's nice that Forman recognized this by not trying to "say" anything. But to make a picture that gets its life simply by living—like Ivan Passer's

Intimate Lighting (shot by Ondříček, as well, in 1965)—takes a subcutaneous sure touch that Forman didn't have even at home. He laid on atmosphere very heavily and had a deficient sense of attention-span—another way of saying deficient *theatrical* talent. In *Taking Off* he is also socially insecure. Forman has some cinematic gifts but insufficient control of them.

The only performance worth noting is by Lynn Carlin, who was the wife in *Faces* (1968) and who plays the girl's mother here with delicate, sexy ease.

***Fat City*, John Huston, 1972** (*The New Republic*, 19 & 26 August 1972)

Is it time to mourn for Stacy Keach? When I first saw him some seven or eight years ago, in the 1965 Lincoln Center production of *The Country Wife* (1675) and in *MacBird!* (at the Village Gate in New York, in 1967), I thought a really sterling talent had appeared, a man who could grow into a completely apposite yet strikingly individual actor for our times. Christopher Plummer and Fritz Weaver had both affected me the same way when they first came along, actors who combined the size of the classic with the pungency of the immediate, all enclosed in electric charge. Neither Plummer nor Weaver has fulfilled himself so far, whether for personal or socio-cultural reasons. Now Keach shows even earlier signs of faltering. I have watched him frequently on stage and screen. (I decline to select one or the other form as "the" place where an actor fulfills himself in our culture. He can do it in one or the other or both. See Olivier. See Max von Sydow.) And I have insisted on hoping. Yet hope deferred maketh the art sick.

I saw him in *Hamlet* (1603), as Hamlet, in the spring of 1972 at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, a poor production in which Keach seemed to want credit for not offering any radical new interpretation, for hewing to the traditional line. But it was the kind of traditional performance that has made other people look for new ways to do the part, a dull workhorse portrayal. Colors were washed out, readings were prosaic or disjointed, and there was nothing at all of the half-world shadows through which Hamlet wanders. To do a traditional performance truly is to shun impasting anything on the play, to plumb the text as such; Keach merely stated.

Now we get a Keach film, presumably made before the *Hamlet* production. Let me first say that if Keach is asked to supply the force of personality in a role that is fairly trite and merely outlined—the kind of role, as an L.A. policeman, that he was asked to play in *The New Centurions* (also made in 1972, before the *Hamlet* production)—well, he doesn't have that kind of overflowing personality, no self to sell; he has to act or he is lost. He simply doesn't command. *Fat City* (1972) gives him a character to act, but he sloughs it off. First, a look at this John Huston film,

which is supposed to be a comeback for its director but is even less so than *Frenzy* (1972) is for Hitchcock. It's a pugilistic *Lower Depths* (1902), dealing with third-rate boxers in and around Stockton, California, and it is chockfull of facile, clever shooting, editing, and typology. The script, by Leonard Gardner from his greatly overrated novel of the same name, seems based on the belief that if you take a conventional fight picture and simply eliminate the *Body and Soul* (1947) plottiness, the residue will automatically be stark and true. But the residue is simply another order of cliché, a bit more high-toned.

As I watched this story of pugs not making it, turning to drink, getting battered, being forced to work as onion and fruit pickers, floating around grimy streets, I kept thinking that life is really a lot tougher than that. This is glib tragedy, done with glib fictional-film symbols. And it's not helped by Huston's tired attempts at wowie-zowie direction. For instance, as a defeated fighter leaves his dressing room and walks down the empty corridor to return to his hotel, the lights switch off over his head. I think I got the point. And in this purportedly naturalistic epic, Huston permits Susan Tyrrell to give a performance as an alcoholic broad that stinks of greasepaint and artifice.

Keach had the ability and the chance to give a performance, however, as Paul Newman and James Cagney have given in comparable roles, and he is simply too lazy or atrophied or coddled to work at it. Watch Keach's face, his patterns of visual response and inquiry, and you'll see that they are often Keach, unrelated to the man he is supposed to be. Listen to the vocal patterns and speech, and you'll hear, save for a few superficial "smudges," that Yale is crowding through. None of this is a matter of academic nicety but of central vigor and rigor, which Keach doesn't seem to bother about much anymore.

I hope this requiem is premature. The Keach qualities I saw in a misconceived *Coriolanus* (1608) at Yale Repertory Theatre in 1967, in Arthur Kopit's *Indians* on Broadway in 1969, were those of a genuine actor. He seems to have found that he can get by with doing less. My complaints may sound odd, I know, in the face of his mounting success, but, to put it selfishly, it's not the success I had imagined for him. Well, maybe he'll meet some directors who understand what he has and is not using, and who will jar him alive again. This (present) mourner certainly hopes so.

Le Retour d'Afrique, Alain Tanner, 1973 (*The New Republic*, 22 September 1973)

Alain Tanner, the Swiss filmmaker, wants to embrace the world. Fine. Most artists worth their salt, or ours, want to make great art on great subjects, although they usually fail, some ridiculously. Tanner has made two attempts up to now, one of

which is very beautiful. His first film, *Charles, Dead or Alive* (1969), while exceptionally skillful, skated on pat attitudes about the meaninglessness of money. But his second film, *La Salamandre* (1971), was a subtle, perceptive, moving work on the shape and possibilities of freedom in industrial society.

Still engaged with engagement, Tanner now slides back toward the easy acceptances of his first film. His new film is being called *Le Retour d'Afrique* (1973) in the United States, instead of *Return from Africa*, presumably to keep the title-language consistent with *La Salamandre*. A young Geneva couple are fed up with their lives. She works in an art gallery, he as a landscape gardener and, though they are not conventional people and don't have conventional friends, they are afraid of slipping into the bourgeoisie. They decide to move to Algiers and are encouraged by a letter from a friend who moved there five years before. They sell their car and piano and all furniture except a mattress; they give a farewell party. Then, as they are about to leave, they get a telegram from their friend in Algiers telling them not to come, to await a letter from him.

They think they are going to leave in a few days, so they simply lie low in their virtually empty apartment, a bit embarrassed to tell their friends roundabout that they haven't actually gone yet. They skulk out for food and cigarettes. The best element in the film is the way Tanner transforms an initial small social dodge into a major crisis: the days go on and on and the letter doesn't arrive and the weather changes in the empty apartment. Before the long-delayed letter finally arrives, explaining that the friend is returning, that they should wait and get his tips before they go, we know that they will *not* go. Their "return from Africa" is their return from some days of limbo in their apartment. And the rest of the story shows their gradual slide into the very life they had once tried to flee.

We know this will happen. That's the trouble with the film. Once the telegram arrives asking them to wait, we know everything that will follow: the draining of impulse, the ease of relapse, the realization that you take your problems with you anyway, wherever you go. (And, by the way, is there no bourgeoisie in Algeria?) All this is very familiar ground, on which Tanner casts no fresh light. At the end he has in fact to shift subjects—to women's rights—in order to find some sort of conclusion.

Tanner is intelligent, gifted and (sometimes) fruitfully discontent. His eye searches for the fresh, though non-freakish view. He edits with a pleasantly eccentric rhythm. He overdoes some devices, like repeated slow horizontal pans, and he sinks into one bit of banal symbolism—the destruction of a young tree in a housing project—but, as cinematic experience, his films are always good to watch. So far, only *La Salamandre* has been more (*much* more) than that. *Le Retour d'Afrique* has two sufficiently interesting young actors, François Marthouret and Josée Destoop,

but the better they and the texture are, the more disappointing the film is. We tell ourselves, subconsciously, that a man who makes films this well—stimulated by Godard without being a Godard lackey—must be en route to some substance. But in this case he isn't.

I don't know how long Tanner took to make this film, but it seems to have been made too quickly—or, at any rate, too soon. He didn't probe his material enough, didn't ask it enough questions before he began. I hope he'll wait longer, think harder, imagine more extensively before his next film, which I look forward to.

The Invitation, Claude Goretta, 1973 (*The New Republic*, 24 May 1975)

Long before its vogue in painting, minimal art, or at least the minimalizing instinct, had grown strong in literature and drama. Mostly, I would guess, it was enfeebled imitating of Chekhov, in the belief that if he could do without conventional plot, then the way to be "modern" was simply to have no plot. The difference between this school and naturalism is mostly one of intent. Both schools try to eliminate dramaturgic interference with the veristic flow of events, but the naturalist usually has a sociological/political purpose while the minimalist has aesthetic/characterological goals. Inevitably there have been some (let's call them) minimalist filmmakers. The Czech film *Intimate Lighting* (1965) is still the best I know, *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971) had more minimalism than I think it intended, and the French film *Don't Cry with Your Mouth Full* (1973) comes modestly close to the ideal.

Now the French-Swiss weigh in with *The Invitation* (1973), by Claude Goretta, a fairly extreme example of the plotless film, which depends entirely on our interest in the lives that flow before us—the implications and resonances in them, rather than any developed narrative involving them. Goretta is a colleague of the greatly gifted Alain Tanner, has worked with him in England, has co-directed with him, and has worked for Swiss television. Goretta has made six previous films—one of them called *Chekhov or the Mirror of Lost Lives* (1965)! He uses some of Tanner's actors. Like Tanner he has taste, sympathy, intelligence, skill, and immediate ambitions. And, like Tanner, he has script troubles.

Goretta wrote *The Invitation* with Michael Viala. As in Chekhov's plays, the protagonist is multiple—the staff of an office. One of the staff, a soft man in early middle-age, lives with his mother; when she dies, he sells their house, moves to a considerable estate outside Geneva, and invites his colleagues to a housewarming party on a Sunday. (He has not left his job; despite his new affluence he wants to

keep working.) His boss and seven co-workers spend a summer afternoon with him, ministered to by a suave, incredibly decadent-looking manservant, played by François Simon, son of the famous Michel Simon.

The camera simply attends the party. In plot terms, nothing happens. There is a small outburst of anger at the end in which the host is accidentally knocked down and, distressed, asks his guests to leave. Otherwise: one man keeps telephoning his wife and reporting on what they have to eat and drink. A spinster gets the megrims, locks herself in a bathroom for a time, then suddenly reappears when they're about to break in. The office clown cuts up. The boss and an older woman employee arrange a rendezvous. The young girl in the group gets tight and semi-strips. The arch-conservative of the group storms at the decadence. Slight scuffle; the party winds down. The film ends back at the office, everything as was except that the girl who stripped has been replaced.

Nothing is wrong with this film except that not enough is right with it. If a film is just going to look at some lives, then the lives have to be interesting either in depth or novelty or both. At least some covered reticulation, of social or political or *any* kind of relevance, ought to be uncovered. All that we get here is the unsurprising—true but not with any unforeseen truth. Of *course* the clown goes too far and the girl gets drunk and strips, of *course* the party builds to a bit of noise and then goes into late-afternoon quiet. But out of all this “of courseness” comes no special penetration and very little pathos. So, for all the accurate acting and discreetly disposed directing, the focus shifts regrettably to Goretta himself. Instead of admiring what he has done, we feel that we are asked to admire his unbanal good taste in doing so little.

***The Phantom of Liberty*, Luis Buñuel, 1974**

(*The New Republic*, 16 November 1974)

The Phantom of Liberty (1974), Luis Buñuel's latest film, doesn't matter much as cinema: it's remarkable only because it's the work of a seventy-four-year-old director whose devilish dexterity is unshaken.

In *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) Buñuel spun satire out of the surrealist extension of daily bourgeois protocol—appointments for lunch and drinks and dinner. The passion with which the characters clung to their little routines was the spine on which Buñuel hung their bones. But there is no comparable point in *The Phantom of Liberty*. It *looks* a good deal like *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*: it has the same cinematographer, Edmond Richard, and the same designer, Pierre Guffroy. But this new film is just a series of jokes-by-reversal, none

of them with social or political point. In Toledo in 1808 a group of Spaniards are being shot by Napoleon's troops. Instead of shouting "Down with tyranny!" as they die, they shout "Down with liberty!" Outside of the surprise, what's funny? Why bother? The film segues to modern Paris. A shifty man gives postcards to little girls in the park. When their parents see the cards, they are shocked and excited. When we see the cards, we discover that they are conventional scenic views. They might as well have been X-rays or perfectly blank, for the simple effect of surprise.

Each sequence flows, by means of one of its characters, into the next. Later some guests arrive in a drawing room for a luncheon party. They chit-chat, then they move to a grand table surrounded by toilets instead of chairs. Men lower their trousers, women raise their skirts, and they all sit around the table, still chatting. The maid moves about, serving toilet paper on a silver tray. At last one guest rises and asks the maid in a whisper where the dining room is: she says it's the second door on the right down the hall. Funny but funny in a vacuum, like the Three Stooges as against the Marx Brothers.

Jean-Claude Brialy, Monica Vitti, and Michel Piccoli are among the actors who do smoothly what they're supposed to do. The script, by Buñuel and his usual French collaborator, Jean-Claude Carrière, just doesn't ask of them or the director nearly enough. The contradictions of *The Milky Way* (1969) compressed history and satirized angry controversy. But there is no real social anger here: at best only the japes of wrath.

***Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, Martin Scorsese, 1974**

(*The New Republic*, 15 February 1975)

Everyone and his brother—or her sister—has noted the recent lack of American films about women and of female stars. A new film, presumably trying to fill the gap, only emphasizes them. *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) was written by Robert Getchell, stars Ellen Burstyn, and was directed by Martin Scorsese (who did *Mean Streets* in 1973). It starts with a film-school joke: a parody of fake outdoor settings as per Hollywood studios ca. 1935, with a small girl (Alice) using profane language in the syrupy setting. Then there's a time lapse. The girl is now woman and mother, married to a nasty truck driver in New Mexico. He is killed in an accident, Alice and her eleven-year-old son start out for California where she can try to resume her interrupted nightclub singing career.

The script is apparently meant to show us the victimization of women by the roles that men assign to them, and one woman's attempt to fight back. But how many women's lives are represented by a mediocre singer who takes to the road

with her son, gets a job in a tacky club, has to leave town because of her sexual involvement with a psychotic, moves on, and in another town finds happiness with a solid young divorced rancher? What relation has this script, even as heightened dramatization, to the questions that are now disturbing many women? Getchell's script is Hollywood junk, new style. A patina of modernity, in language and sexual behavior, is laid over a carpentered-up series of old Joan Crawford scenes. Glittery Trash—that's what this is.

Ellen Burstyn performs quite capably as Alice, but she lacks the personality to be a star. A very good actress, concerned with the integrity of what she does, she simply doesn't have any dimensions beyond her acting ability. It's cruel because there's nothing about her to dislike. (Barbra Streisand, whom I do dislike, is unquestionably a star.) That blue-eyed blob, Kris Kristofferson, is Mr. Right at the end, a not-very-mod version of that archetypal rock-of-Gibraltar haven for harried women. The son, Alfred Lutter, is needle-nosed and properly annoying, and his dialogue with his mother, love by litigation, is Getchell's best writing. The most interesting character is the psychotic, played by Harvey Keitel (of *Mean Streets*). The revelation of the mental crevasses under the winning surface is scary.

If Scorsese ever makes up his mind not to flog at a picture he's making, he might become a good director. But he won't let anything just happen; he has to *do* something to everything, usually with hand-held camera. Early on, this gave me a slightly seasick feeling, which never quite left. Possibly this is why the dominant tone of the film for me was insecurity. Not Alice's, the filmmakers'.

Karl May, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1974 (*The New Republic*, 14 & 21 July 1986)

Karl May (1974) is the second part of the "German trilogy" by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. The first part, *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* (1972), and the third part, *Our Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977), have already been shown in the United States. Now the missing middle is presented by the Film Forum and Goethe House in New York, and inevitably it amplifies the intent of Syberberg's gigantic work.

The title character, virtually unknown in the U.S., is one of the most famous authors in Europe. His life was as extraordinary as his output and success. Karl May (1842–1912) was the son of Saxon weavers, so poor they fed their family on potato peelings. He was blind for the first four years of his life. (Both the blindness and the recovery are unexplained.) In 1856 he got a scholarship to a teacher-training school, where he did well but was expelled for theft in 1859. He managed

to continue his studies, earned a teacher's certificate in 1861, taught for a while in various places, then stole a roommate's watch and went to prison for six weeks. He also served two additional terms for fraud between 1865 and 1874.

About this time, he changed; he began to write. May became a high-speed manufacturer of stories and sensational novels while he also edited magazines. His success exploded when he turned to adventure stories and began to pour out Westerns, mostly about a sort of blood brother to Indians (something like James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo) called Old Shatterhand, along with tales set in a languorous Middle East. He became very famous and very rich, bought an estate near Dresden that he called the Villa Shatterhand, and shortly after the turn of the century divorced his wife of some twenty years and remarried. (The film says he never left Saxony. Two encyclopedias say that, just before and after the turn of the century, he visited North Africa, the Near East, and the United States.)

A recent estimate is that, to date, 11.5 million copies of his books have been sold in Germany, and a Hungarian friend tells me that his books are still popular in her country. He has been translated into twenty languages—little, as far as I can tell, into English. His collected German edition of seventy-four volumes (including thirty-three travel volumes) was, as of 1976, not yet complete. In the years after World War II, a German film director named Alfred Vohrer specialized in adaptations of May's Westerns.

Karl May begins shortly after 1900 when, having achieved reputation and riches, having lived down the erratic episodes of his past, May became embroiled in disputes with a publisher. These led to lawsuits intended to rake up his past and to discredit him. The suits dragged on for years, but he died with his reputation restored. In 1912 he gave a lecture, his last, in Vienna, which was attended by the young Adolf Hitler, then living in a flophouse. Hitler was as impressed by the man as by the books. This fact may have been prime in Syberberg's perception that Karl May's life, compounded of fabricated mythology, personal disgrace, and dogged refusal to accept that disgrace as final, was essential to a portrait of the romantic and grimly real Germany of the last one hundred years.

Cinematically, Syberberg treats this professional mythmaker in a style quite different from that of the prior and succeeding films. In the first scene, May and a friend are in a stage setting of an Oriental garden; in the last scene, May lies dead in a glassless greenhouse, his wife sitting next to him, with a wigwam behind her and snow (Syberberg's snow!) falling gently. These two scenes are almost all that relate visually to Parts One and Three of the trilogy. The rest of *Karl May* is done in realistic drawing rooms and studies, bedrooms, courtrooms, offices, kitchens, terraces, and gardens. I assume that these are not settings, that they are relics of bourgeois Wilhelmine heaviness that Syberberg hunted up for his film.

All the principal characters are middle-aged or older. All of them are played by actors who are not only splendidly right for their roles but were, apparently, chosen for what the German public knew of them. Syberberg used actors who were prominent during the Nazi regime because, I infer, he wanted to correlate the delusory mythologies that May created with the mythologies that these actors had served. Helmut Käutner, who plays May, was a director and actor under Hitler. (He continued directing after the war and also worked in Hollywood.) Kristina Söderbaum, who plays May's first wife, was launched as a star in the late 1930s by her then-husband, Veit Harlan, a pre-eminent Nazi director. Lil Dagover, who dates from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and who worked right through the Nazi era, plays May's second wife.

The cast, the settings, the meticulous soundtrack, the superb costumes (expensive fabrics for all, fur-collared dressing gowns for the men), the shrewd color photography by Dietrich Lohmann that exploits the crags and particularities of the men's faces—all are very much part of Syberberg's theme. In its visual and aural texture, this is Germany at its apex: victor in the Franco-Prussian War, self-adjudged master of the world intellectually and culturally, possible ruler of Europe, a nation (as Nietzsche dreamed) capable of giving the West once again Dionysian spirit and Greek tragic stature. The sound of those resonant German voices, the almost overpowering articulation of those cumulative German sentences (whether or not we understand the language) enunciated like the unfurling of verbal banners, the pride even in legal formalities as still another proof of their civilization, the very intensity of the lamplight over dining-room tables, all combine to create a self-idolatrous society with, bitterly for the rest of us eventually, a good deal to be self-idolatrous about. Scene after scene, figure after figure, is like the early twentieth-century photography of that cruel master August Sander, here given color, motion, and sound. Syberberg's Germany believes in its rank and destiny, feeds on myths, is furious at this mundane mythologist when he is suspected of being spurious, and is happy to celebrate him when he wins his law cases because then Germans can reinstate their faith in his fake heroisms.

A familiar tag about Syberberg is that he combines Wagner and Brecht. No Wagner here; it's Mahler and Liszt. But, in architecture and ellipsis, much Brecht. The film is composed of many short scenes, each introduced by a title that foretells its content, each separated from the next by a "wipe." The effect is of a chronicle, stations on a journey. The first hour or so of the three-hour film is stubbornly slow. Then *Karl May* reveals *why* it has been slow, as the larger themes come clear. But Syberberg is always deft, scene by scene. For instance, note the scene near the end in which the ranting Hitler first appears, identified by the name on the locker door behind him, moves through the large barracks room of the flophouse still

ranting about the need for will while the other men ignore or laugh at him, then comes back to the locker room, still ranting. The long arc of the camera movement inscribes theatrical gesture under his theatrical words.

The film has an added meaning, not specifically German. Karl May is one of the early figures in widely influential popular culture. Improved technology—in this case, printing—gave popular tastes, and caterers to those tastes, new force. Balances began to shift in the authority of high art, in the control of private fantasy. One function of art has always been to disclose the impossible but desirable. Popular art brings the impossible nearer and makes it less strange. Karl May had something to do with the growth of pop art as facile ego gratification. He may not be well known in America, but the quality of daydream he helped to inspire is part of the secret life at its least demanding, its most flattering.

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,
Chantal Akerman, 1975 (*The New Republic*, 4 April 1983)

Anyone who knows Franz Xaver Kroetz's play *Request Concert* will be reminded of it by Chantal Akerman's film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Kroetz, a German, wrote *Request Concert* in 1973: it was published in the United States in a collection of his plays in 1976 and was produced Off-Broadway in 1981. It's a long and wordless one-act play—the only sounds are TV and radio—in which the one character, a woman in her early forties, comes home to her small apartment in a Bavarian city after a day's work and does what she does every night: changes clothes, goes to the bathroom, makes and eats dinner, washes stockings, knits, and so on. Then she goes to bed. Then, just as if it were equally routine, she gets up and takes an overdose of pills.

Akerman, a Belgian, made her film in 1975. Film journals have discussed it recurrently since then, but it has only just arrived—at the Film Forum in New York. The title sets the dot-in-the-cosmos tone of the picture. It runs three hours and eighteen minutes. It follows three days in the life of a lower-middle-class Brussels widow, about forty. She lives in a comfortably but tastelessly furnished apartment with her student son, who is away all day and with whom at night she barely converses, not out of antipathy—there's no hint that they dislike each other—but out of inertia. In the first day, we follow her in her routines; the second day, the routines are slightly condensed, but we see her make a few slips and mistakes; the third day is a bit more condensed and there are a few more slips.

The only significant way in which Dielman differs from other women like her is that she is a (discreet) prostitute. Every afternoon she has one customer. Each

one is a “regular,” and she receives each one identically, with a shopkeeper’s greeting, then hangs his hat and coat in the hall closet, takes him down the hall to the bedroom, and closes the door. Then a time-lapse, dim-and-return of lights, and she escorts him out, both of them fully dressed, gives him his hat and coat, takes his money, and says goodbye until next week. She puts the money in a covered china tureen on the dining-room table. Her schedule of customers is much like her schedule of evening meals: she has a dinner dish scheduled in order for each night of the week, served to herself and her son with that tureen pulled to one side.

The third day, however, the day of slightly increased slips in her routine, the bedroom procedure varies. We go in there with her and the man. We see her take off her blouse, nothing more. We see the naked man lying on her and satisfying himself; apparently also, he satisfies her, against her interest and will. Then we see her combing her hair while he naps on the bed. With no more hurry or emotion than she has shown in her combing, she picks up a pair of scissors and shoves them into the man’s neck. Then she goes into the dining room and sits at the table that bears the tureen with her bedroom earnings. She just sits there. We know her son will be home soon. She just sits there. The room grows dimmer with evening, and the electric signs across the street flicker on the walls as they have done throughout the film. She seems to smile almost reflectively, as she just sits there and the film ends.

Very early, Akerman’s method becomes clear. Of every action that she chooses to show in Dielman’s life, she is going to show every detail. For example, after her customer leaves, Dielman undresses again and bathes. We see her in the tub as she soaps herself thoroughly, washes herself off, then soaps herself all over again and washes off again. At first the Akerman process seems merciless; then slightly ridiculous. Kroetz writes, in the introduction to *Request Concert*:

Naturally the play must not irritate the audience, but it must provide insights for them, about the emptiness of Fräulein Rasch’s life. Care must be taken that the actual activities in the play are not drawn out so as to become tedious and aggravating. When the informative content of an activity is exhausted and it only repeats itself, it should be broken off, even if it violates the form of the play, namely that stage time is equivalent to real time.

Akerman, if she knew Kroetz’s play, disregarded his warning, and eventually won.

The mystique of film, different from the theater’s, helps her. Anything done on a stage has at least some thaumaturgic power because a person has given up some portion of his or her own life to do it for us in a highly particularized place. Tedium can quickly set in if the selected action doesn’t sustain interest “horizontally”; but, initially, “vertically,” it fascinates, however briefly. Tedium sets in, too, with film, during an uninteresting action, but it takes somewhat longer to arrive

because the person isn't even actually there, which heightens the thaumaturgic power. Besides, on film, we can look "around" the action, examine the contextual world in ways that theater doesn't quite afford. (It's part of Antonioni's theme in *Blow-Up* [1966].) Akerman understands this film power, and she pushes past conventional tolerance of prosaic activity so resolutely—Dielman's slow elevator rides up and down in her building, Dielman mixing a meatloaf from beginning to end—that the tedium eventually proceeds through giggle and irritation to a kind of hypnosis. I found myself almost cradled by the film's process, almost protected. I was aware that a method was being practiced on me that is as shrewd as the snip-snap montage of Eisenstein, but I became convinced that this film, if it was to exist at all, could not have existed in any other form. Stunt had given way to *raison d'être*. I wasn't precisely gripped, but I stopped wondering whether I wanted to leave. I began to want to survive the picture, to be able to look back on it as a whole, to see what this method had been in aid of.

Then, as the picture moved into the third day and as Dielman's errors began to increase slightly—for instance, dropping the brush with which every morning she cleans her son's shoes—I began to worry about the ending. Remembering Kroetz, I wondered whether Dielman was heading toward suicide. But Kroetz's protagonist, in her impassive suicide, had merely condensed abruptly what would have been identical lonely evenings for the next thirty-five years or so. Dielman exists—even though taciturnly—in a world of others: her son; a neighboring young wife, whom we never see, but who daily hands in a baby in a carry-cot for Dielman to mind for a short time while the mother shops; a favorite waitress in the café where Dielman stops for coffee every day after her own shopping. (On the third day, the favorite waitress isn't there, and Dielman's favorite table is taken. Further small disruptions.) Dielman has a sister in Canada who wonders why she doesn't remarry, who has sent her a birthday present. All these factors give her a quite different position from that of Kroetz's woman.

A key moment is the third day's session with the baby. Once again the unseen mother hands the carry-cot in through the front door. Once again Dielman sets it down in the living room. The baby cries a little. She picks it up and dandies it, and it cries louder. She puts it back in the carry-cot; the crying subsides. Then Dielman deliberately picks it up again; it cries louder again. Dielman seems to have discovered that she is irritating the child and is persisting. It suddenly flashed through my head, alerted to an "ending," that she might throw it out the window. But she returns it to the returning mother.

Still, when the ending came, it was a surprise—the best kind, a logical surprise. The scissors are in the bedroom because she brought them in to open the present from her sister, the one who thinks Dielman has remained single through

choice. Perhaps the (apparent) sexual climax that the customer induced in Dielman is the ultimate invasion of privacy that snaps her. In any event, ghoulish though it may sound, I was glad when she committed the murder; it fulfilled the film, the film's method, retrospectively. When she then sits at the dining-room table, the fee-filled tureen beside her, the body in the bedroom, her son on his way home, she seems serene, purged.

Because of the factual fabric, however, a few factual questions nag. Why is Dielman a prostitute? How could this have been her only way of earning a living? How had she set up her profession? To all neighborhood eyes, she is ultra-respectable: how had she met her first customer? And what does her son think is going on? He is in his late teens, shown in conversation to be a sexual innocent but far from stupid; what does he think is the source of the money on which they live? At one point, his complicity is even suggested: on the second night, Dielman tells him he can come home earlier the next afternoon if he likes. Does he know what happens in the afternoons? These finicky questions tug at the film's implication of huge, blindly grinding forces.

And the casting creates a small problem in verisimilitude. Dielman is played by Delphine Seyrig, who is a more than competent actress but who, since *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), has been one of the most exquisite women on the screen. It's hard to credit that a widow of her extraordinary beauty would not have attracted suitors, possibly a husband, as her sister says; would have been unable to find other work. When Seyrig played the dullish spinster in *I Sent a Letter to My Love* (1980), her role was written to let her act "against" her looks. Not here. She is not dull-witted, only ordinary, and this is less credible. I'm not contending that there are no beautiful lower-middle-class housewives, only that, on the screen, the use of a beauty in such a role seems to counter Akerman's method somewhat, seems a throwback to earlier film days when every leading female role, drudge or duchess, was cast with a beauty. If Dielman had been played by, say, Jeanne Moreau, no doubts would arise about Movieland intrusion into the film's naturalism.

But *is* it naturalism? Once again—and surely not for the last time—Akerman's film raises the fascinating question of the camera's duplicity. The more intensely factual that a film gets, the less naturalistic it becomes. Every carefully controlled frame (Babette Mangolte is the precise cinematographer) puts a set of data before us, but the concentration of the camera on those data, the disregard of the conventions of tempo and drama, of conventional motion in a motion picture, render the familiar into an abstraction even as we loll in the familiarity. And this abstraction, this rarefied style, is ultimately the dramatic mode of Akerman's film.

Some have discussed *Jeanne Dielman* as a document of women's oppressed social position, but that view seems to me coarse and forced, if not absurd; nothing is shown that prevented her from making a life of her own in the years since her

husband's death. For me, the film is about danger: the hairline between control and its fracture, the thin control that keeps the furies caged, against which the dailiness of stoves and shoppings, of brushings and baths and neat foldings of pajamas, is shored as a bulwark. In Alain Jessua's excellent *Life Upside Down* (1964), it was a man who slipped between the cracks of dailiness into unreal serenity. Here, with the fissures spaced more widely, the person who slips away, into comparable pitiful serenity, is a woman: who lives at a certain address in Brussels.

***Alpha Beta*, Anthony Page, 1976** (*The New Republic*,
18 September 1976)

Four or five years ago I read English reviews of a domestic drama called *Alpha Beta* (1972), by E. A. Whitehead, a two-character piece performed in London by Albert Finney and Rachel Roberts. It sounded like a skin-stripping suburban cannibalism rite, and when it was done Off-Broadway I went to see it. Without Finney and Roberts the rite seemed more patterned than passionate, like a lethal gavotte. Now there's a film of *Alpha Beta* with Finney and Roberts, made in 1973 but not released until now—a modest “film of the play” but that's quite sufficient for the piece. The drama as such seems no deeper than it did, but the two performances give the film fire and also, paradoxically, give it a stylistically hybrid quality.

The play/film is set in the Liverpool outskirts and has three acts/sequences, two in the 1960s and one in the early '70s. Despite the period, the basic bitter love-hate-possession struggle between the husband and wife seems late Victorian. It's the stuff of H. G. Wells. In several of Wells's novels and in his autobiography he tells of the misery of late Victorian and Edwardian wives who feared or hated sex and of husbands who might possibly have loved their wives, who often wanted to, but were driven elsewhere by sexual imagination and needs. Historically we can now see that the wives were as victimized by conditioning as the men were by the same conditioning. At that moment, however, it looked like a struggle between well-meaning but warped women and life-discovering men. (And the rare woman who could have sex joyously was of course miraculous to the man lucky enough to find her.)

In *Alpha Beta* it's the same late Victorian trouble. All the snarling, physical tussling, household dreariness, the tortured attempts to understand the other person, are rooted in “old-fashioned” sexual frustrations. The wife saved her virginity for marriage; then marital sex, possibly just because of that saving, turned her off. She managed to have two children, and that was that. The husband hates smut-tiness, is sickened by the dirty jokes his repressed pals tell in the pubs—including

his father-in-law, who was so strict with his daughter before her marriage; but the husband wants the liberated sex life he can imagine.

Rigid Puritanism is hardly dead in the world. (Last winter in Crete, parents told me that they don't allow their daughters to date, even perfectly respectably toward marriage; courtships have to be carried on *sub rosa* as Ma and Pa did theirs.) I'm not denying—how could I?—the truth of Whitehead's play; I note only that the issue is, in twentieth-century British-American literature and drama, a stale one and, despite the bite of much of his dialogue, he cannot make it much more than a clinical oddity today, wretched but remote.

The stylistic paradox comes from those two strong performances by Finney and Roberts. First, though the characters are not identical, Finney's husband has some of the broiling truculence he had as the feisty sexy young factory-worker in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1961), and Roberts' housewife has some of the same sexual knottiness as her widow in *This Sporting Life* (1963). Second, their very methods as actors, their choices (to use a current cant term among actors), operate against traditional symbols, are graphed closer to psychological nuance. Thus it all seems a drama of 1900 done by two highly contemporary actors who carry with them strong reminders of the 1960s. It's almost like seeing a seventy-five-year-old play in modern dress.

Some of the film slashes and all of it is grueling, but, for all its honesty, after we've been through the anguish, it doesn't seem sufficiently worthwhile. Unlike *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (play, 1962; film, 1966), to take a mid-century dollop of marital hell, *Alpha Beta* never seems much more than a sad sociological case.

Anthony Page, who directed the first production of *Alpha Beta* at the Royal Court (and who also directed there the best production of *Hedda Gabler* [1890] I have seen), struggles to keep the play from seeming cabined and cribbed. In fact, struggles a bit too hard. If he had accepted that this was a filmed play, we could have done so, too. Anyway, he handles his actors very well. Charles Stewart's photography is flat and unfeeling. A domestic-interior film like this, as Ingmar Bergman knows, needs at least as much subtlety as outdoor stuff with mountains and sunsets.

***The American Friend*, Wim Wenders, 1977**

(*The New Republic*, 1 October 1977)

Trouble. It's a trouble I've noted in passing from time to time, and it's getting worse. It centers on the idea of the director's function.

The director in the theater has, usually, a function akin to the actors': his job is to serve the author, to help the actors realize the author's design. In this century the

theater director has taken on additional functions, sometimes helpfully, altering or expanding the author's design—especially with classics where there is concern that the play has grown stale or that a changed society needs the play reinterpreted. But in even the most extreme cases of reinterpretation, the relation between author and theater director is one of collaboration; the author is, if only implicitly, always present. The director is working for him even when he is working, seemingly, against him. I once asked the Argentinian film director Leopoldo Torre Nilsson whether he ever directed plays, and he said, “No, I don't want to be an author's lawyer.” Even when the director is figuratively the author's prosecutor, the sense of relation with the Other has been unavoidable in any theater production in the last 150 years that began with a script.

In films, which took the term “director” from the theater, the case has become different. Through film history most directors have been something like the director in the (no-longer-extant) popular theater: the man in charge of a group that got together to put on a script, changing it in lots of ways as he went along but still the chief engineer fulfilling a flexible blueprint. There were always exceptions to this, in pictures where people got together every night after a day's shooting to concoct the next day's shooting; still, in the main the director was the executive for the author, though the term “author” now often included the producer.

But, almost from the start, there was a different kind of exception—for instance, D. W. Griffith in much of his career. This kind of exception has not exactly become the rule, yet now there are enough such exceptions to have a rule of their own. Increasingly, in recent years, the weight has shifted; the director of a film is something other than the executant for the author/producer. The director may himself be the author or a collaborator on the script or the proponent of the subject, but in any case or combination of cases, he is not anybody's lawyer: the creative impulse and temper of the film are his. The author, in the sense of writer, if there is one other than the director, has become one of his staff like his cinematographer and designer. *He*, the director, is the real author.

I won't take space to list any of the fine film artists for whom this practice has resulted in their best work; the list would include most of the best films ever made anywhere. By now, freedom—from producers' supervision, from the function of turning someone else's typewritten pages into pictures—freedom to use the film medium as directly and personally as a painter uses oils and canvas: such freedom has become the standard by which a director's function and work are judged. Particularly since the Second World War, it's been assumed that to be a good and serious director means *ipso facto* to be the central and originating creative force of a film.

But the blessings in this change have become thoroughly mixed. The ideal of director-as-creator has been assumed by many men who are talented as *directors*, of

acting and camera movement and editing and design, but who falter when they ask themselves to supply the material that they are to direct. A cartoon analogy, not utterly false, is to imagine Sir Georg Solti deciding to compose all the scores for his concerts. The result of this self-imposed injunction for film directors has been a lot of disappointment; often we get the sad spectacle of a real *directing* talent being wasted because the person in question feels the imperative to be monarch of all he surveys. I'm not talking about the much-argued right of final cut. Any film on which a competent director does not have final cut is to some degree an artistic blasphemy. I'm talking about the new necessity to be another kind of artist as well as a director.

The first name I always think of in this sad connection is the English director Lindsay Anderson. He has made four features, *This Sporting Life* (1963), *If...* (1968), *O Lucky Man!* (1973), and *In Celebration* (1975). The first three were his "own" films, and each of them was for the most part directed exceptionally well, often brilliantly; but more and more these three films revealed highly erratic judgment about what Anderson ought to be putting before us, scene by scene. The fourth film proved the point by contrast. *In Celebration* was part of a series that brought established plays to the screen. Anderson had (I heard) worked with the author on the theater script, which doesn't controvert my point—it was still the *author's* play. And in the film version Anderson devoted himself to serving the author, which he did adroitly. But as a result of his insistence elsewhere on making *Anderson* films—anyway, I believe it's because of this—Anderson's film career is on the rocks. He keeps working in the London theater, with varying success but at least working, because in the theater he concentrates on directing. Meanwhile we're losing the work of a good film director because of his insistence that in films he be more than a director.

Anderson is only one of many examples. Another: Sam Peckinpah. He has a genuine and unique talent, but on the evidence he has a very limited *originating* brain. His early features, *Ride the High Country* (1962) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969), made the most, which was a lot, of that directing talent and his originating ability. As a result of the success of those pictures, Peckinpah got increased control, increased obligation to be a "whole" artist. Now he is like an ex-champion boxer who has become his own manager and is swinging hard but wild. If he had the right producer to guide him—no, to control him—if he were not inflated with ideas of selfhood that he can't sustain, his career might be flowering instead of floundering.

All the above was brought dismally home by the arrival of the newest film from the gifted young German, Wim Wenders. He made one of the best post-war German films, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* (1972), and he made it from a 1970 novel by his friend Peter Handke, with Handke's screenplay and

collaboration. Wenders' next film, *Alice in the Cities* (1974), was much more his own work and was a discursive, trite social criticism-comparison of the United States and Germany. His subsequent film, *Kings of the Road* (1976), was like a parody of latter-day filmmakers' freedom, wildly slopped around. It had a good basic idea: a young German makes a freelance vagabond living by traveling from town to town in a van, repairing motion-picture projectors. He lives in a world outside the world whose fantasies he keeps in repair. Some of it was quietly, pungently good. But three hours of detour and divagation turned the picture into a display of freedom curdled into self-indulgence. Wenders had not learned that it's not necessarily creative merely to fracture convention.

He has said that *Kings of the Road* was made "without a screenplay and, above all, without a plot" and that next he wanted to work within the framework of someone else's story. He chose a 1974 novel called *Ripley's Game*, by Patricia Highsmith, whose work he had long admired, retitled it *The American Friend* (1977), and, he says, soon felt that he had to move away from the story, most of all from the characters. Perhaps it doesn't prove anything that Highsmith thinks Wenders' script "pretty hair-raising" and that the casting of Dennis Hopper as Ripley "upset" her "profoundly" (*New Review*, August 1977). I haven't read the novel. But I do know, from sitting through the two hours of the film, that the second hour is not only boring, it destroys the good first hour.

The American Friend is about a Hamburg picture-framer, Bruno Ganz, who is dying of leukemia and who is offered a lot of money by a French racketeer, Gérard Blain, to murder a rival racketeer in Paris. Blain has been steered to Ganz by Hopper, an American art racketeer. The first hour of the picture, in which Ganz revises his morality in the light of his imminent death and his concern for his wife and child, is done intelligently, grippingly, and the murder sequence is almost hysterically terrible. (Two noted American film directors, Nicholas Ray and Samuel Fuller, are in the cast, along with the French director Jean Eustache.) But then we have to go through the whole thing again, repeated—as Marx said of history—farcically, when Ganz is asked to commit a second murder if he wants full payment. This leads to a series of episodes with him and Hopper, who suddenly befriends him, that raises Wenders' self-indulgence to new levels of audience suffocation.

Where, I asked myself as I watched this initially good picture pound itself to pieces by keeping on and on, was a producer? Where, I dared to think about a new and iconoclastic artist like Wenders, was a Sam Spiegel—even a Harry Cohn—to make the director understand that self-expression and self-satisfaction are not synonymous? That cinematic values and lolling around in cinematic values are not identical? Some of the photography by Robby Müller, who always works for Wenders, is sensationally gorgeous—for instance, a sequence in which an ambulance and a Volkswagen circle on a deserted beach at dawn. Much of the editing by

Peter Pryzgodda is sensitive. But I have rarely been more disgusted by exceptional photography and editing, used so egocentrically.

We all know, though the lesson keeps being read at us, that traditional criteria of drama and character and structure can be supplanted or expanded or seen at unique unhistorical angles. Some of us, who still get preached at on this point, have been saying so at least since Antonioni's films first reached the U.S. But in art, even anti-form needs form. Some conviction of *our* existence (another way of saying the same thing) must accompany the cascading evidence of the artist's knowledge of his own existence. I *want* to be stretched past my known responses, to be forced to examine preconceptions. I don't want to be masturbated over.

Only the immovably prejudiced, I think—I hope—would take the above arguments as a plea for a return to the assembly-line factories of old Hollywood, where a contract director got suspended for not doing what was handed to him, or for an aesthetics that sees film as an especially “cute” way of illustrating type-scripts. But it does seem clear that many gifted directors don't have the *whole* gift of filmmaking in the degree that they have the ability to direct and that, especially if they're under fifty, they feel it would be corruption to face that fact. What these directors—Wenders is only the very latest example—need are collaborators; call them producers or co-authors or whatever. People who have the ability, the sympathy, and the *authority* to say helpfully: “Why not do this? Omit that? Condense the other? Why not fulfill, in your own way, the theme you started back there?”

The directors I'm talking about have no problem with their doing; all their problem is in their choices of what to do and their inability to initiate. Meanwhile, a lot of talent is being sacrificed on the altar of new freedom.

***One Sings, the Other Doesn't*, Agnès Varda, 1977**

(*The New Republic*, 8 October 1977)

There are several pleasures in writing about *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (1977):

First, the director, Agnès Varda, has at last found her “voice” and her material, one no doubt reinforcing the other. Varda has been working in French film since 1955 and was first shown in the United States in 1962, with *Cleo from 5 to 7*. This picture was an archetypal New Wave nuisance, full of cinematic blubber intended and taken as new wisdom made accessible by new approaches to film; gassy with the aesthetic and psychological juvenility that passed and still passes—though with a bit more difficulty, thank heaven—as profundity simply because it's done on film. The subsequent work of Varda's that I saw declined from that level: *Le Bonheur* (1965) was a (possibly) bitter film about the destructiveness of male sexuality, so drenched in (possibly) sardonic lyricism that the (possible) bitterness was lost. A short

documentary called *Uncle Janco* (1967) was stock archness about an eccentric. *Lions Love* (1969), a feature made in Hollywood about Hollywood people, was the kind of picture one could walk out of to make phone calls and return to without feeling that anything had been missed. A documentary (*Daguerréotypes* [1976]) I saw recently on PBS about the street in Paris on which Varda lives had some minimal interest, as any picture about a quaint Paris street must have, but was undistinguished.

Now, very happy news. Varda's latest film is lovely in every way, from start to finish, so the first pleasure about it has to do with Varda herself. After almost twenty-five years of muddling about—additionally irksome because of the critical nonsense about her muddling—she has won through to some judgment, control, and consonance: consonance between her talents and ambitions.

The second pleasure comes from the third. The second is: This is the best film I know about the new attitudes of women toward women and men. Varda denies that she is a "message" filmmaker or that she is a militant: she wants only to see women without caricature. Precisely. Most films that I've seen about Women's Liberation have been unbalanced or falsifying or smug with the cozy bourgeois ecstasy of those suburban consciousness-raising sessions that give the wife something to do on hubby's poker nights; or they utterly disregard the conditions of men's lives that in part contribute to their tyrannies over women. I have a highly subjective standard for latter-day works about women. If they irritate me, I ascribe it to the reasons above, not to male chauvinism. If they make me ashamed, for past and (probably) continuing male chauvinism, I think they're good. *Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman* (1974), by Judy Collins and Jill Godmilow, made me ashamed. So, I'm grateful to say, did Varda's new film.

Third, of course, the picture itself. The screenplay, by Varda, is in three sections: 1962, 1972, and a brief epilogue in 1976. Varda herself tells us on the soundtrack what the picture is going to be about as it starts, and from time to time she narrates transitions. The theme is loving friendship between two women: how that friendship strengthens them in themselves and in their lives with men, how it helps them to full womanhood. The two, played by Valérie Mairesse and Thérèse Liotard, both new to me, are first seen in their late teens in Paris. Liotard is living with a married photographer, already has two children, and is pregnant again; Mairesse, still living with her parents, is just beginning a singing career. Mairesse lies to her parents to get money for an abortion for Liotard, is found out and scolded, leaves home. The photographer is a quiet man trying with his camera to understand women. (Presumably the many delicate pictures in his studio are by Varda herself, who began as a still photographer.) Hopeless of success in any sense, he hangs himself. Liotard returns with her children to her narrow-minded farm-parents. Through the next ten years the two friends keep in touch mostly by letter—and through Varda's narration!

Mairesse goes through a long, loving alliance with an Iranian, which involves going to Iran with him and marrying, bearing his child, then breaking with her husband because she can't stand male-oriented Iranian society, but, still in love, asking her husband to give her another child whom she can keep in France when he goes back to Iran with the first one. Her career, with a singing group for which she writes "new-woman" songs, prospers in a touring street-theater way. Liotard educates herself while drudging on the farm, then moves south to Hyères, where she works in a family-planning clinic and, in time, meets a doctor who divorces so that they can marry—even though her abortion has left her sterile. The last sequence, in 1976, has a feeling of pilgrims who have at least reached a first destination; Liotard and her husband are with Mairesse and her group on a picnic. The very last shot is of Liotard's teenaged daughter—played by Varda's daughter—for whom things will be "clearer."

You see that this is not a plot: it's a narrative of no drastic novelty or drama. Varda has simply devised a series of events that would: (a) include, without heavy-handed epitome, some fairly representative experiences of the generation she's dealing with; (b) provide her with good filmic material; (c) give her the chance to make her film in its true location—within the characters of her two women,

Varda's filmmaking experience has at last led her through prolixity and artiness to reticence and art, a movement roughly analogous to the life-discoveries of her two characters. Most of the time here she "sees" gently but acutely and edits astringently: for instance, the discovery of the suicide or Liotard's wedding—no dwelling on these things just because they could be exploited pictorially. On the other hand, we get somewhat more of Mairesse's wedding in Iran on the assumption that the Muslim ceremony is less familiar, but the real security of the film, its power to create in *us*, comes from Varda's treatment of her two women.

They are not idealized, martyred, sentimentalized. They are just two women who insist on questioning and experiencing, rather than accepting, and who do not act on the assumption that everything that existed before they were born is nonsense. The men are handled with truth and solicitude. The photographer (Robert Dadiès) is a crystalline vignette of a man who has stumbled onto questions in life and in art that are simply too much for him. The Iranian (Ali Raffi) has pride and love and the understanding that his love cannot bridge the gap between him and Mairesse. In short, the film takes place in a recognizable world of contradictions and imperfections—not in an abstract polemical agar-agar jelly.

Varda is helped by Mairesse more than I expected at the beginning. Mairesse is a pudgy-faced redhead whose acting is negative; that is, it consists chiefly of not doing unbelievable things. Her commitment, more than her talent, makes the part vital and gives it nooks and crannies. Never any question about Liotard. She has a sensitive face—imagine what Paula Prentiss would look like if she were real—and

her acting is positive, competent, true. We don't have to wait to find out whether Liotard is good: she contributes right from the start.

In strictest accuracy I have to note that the film rambles on a trifle too long. A few minutes off the end would help. But it's a rich, life-filled work, accomplished in its making, engrossing in its humility and courage.

***The End of the World in Our Usual Bed in a Night Full of Rain*, Lina Wertmüller, 1978** (*The New Republic*, 18 February 1978)

The End of the World in Our Usual Bed in a Night Full of Rain (1978): the title alone tells you it's by Lina Wertmüller. It's her first picture for an American company, Warner Brothers. The news, only two weeks after the news about Ingmar Bergman's high-budget film for a high-power producer (*The Serpent's Egg* [1977], for Dino De Laurentiis), is that this alliance, too, was a mistake.

Wertmüller's best work to date, such films as *Seven Beauties* (1975), *All Screwed Up* (1974), *The Seduction of Mimi* (1972)—with all these titles either truncated or altered for America—had superb vigor, the zest of real assurance and real skill, and a rococo filigree that she had learned from Fellini, with whom she began, and had made her own. All these strengths she used in her loving struggle with her Italy, with what Italians do to their lives and to their country. (Line from *Night Full of Rain*, most of which is set in an ornate Roman apartment: "This apartment is like Italy. It's gorgeous, and there's no money to run it.") Most of her filmmaking energies are in this new film, too, but unlike her past work, they are not applied to very much. Here we get little more than the energies.

Wertmüller, newly linked with American producers, hit on what she apparently thought was a good analogy for her first film with them: a marriage between an Italian and an American. But she reversed sexes. She made the Italian of the pair the husband—her usual leading actor, Giancarlo Giannini. The woman is Candice Bergen. (And the picture is in English.) But Wertmüller's story is not primarily about the conflict of two cultures, although that subject inevitably arises; it's about modern woman and marriage.

The best features of the film are the performances of the pair, acting that has body despite the malnutrition of the script. Giannini is a successful political journalist (a contradiction impossible in the United States—a successful Communist journalist). He growls as humorously and lunges as balletically as ever, and his English—I don't think he's dubbed—has most of the pleasant roller-coaster music of his Italian. The surprise is Bergen. Wertmüller has worked some wonders with her. She not only gets the most out of Bergen's beauty, which has never been in

question, she gets a virtually mercurial performance, funny, puzzled, fiery. The only time Bergen has even been credible before was in *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), when she was directed by Mike Nichols. This role calls for some pyrotechnics, and Bergen sizzles.

All to very little point. The picture begins and ends, as the title implies, in the marriage bed, with a number of flashbacks and excursions to explain what led up to it and what their relations are. The story as such could hardly be more stale, but what keeps reminding us of its staleness is the lack of characterization. We get lots of (reminiscent) furiously romantic scenes: how they met, how and why he lost her, how he chased her from an Italian town to San Francisco and insisted his way into her life; and we get a lot of talk about her troubles, but there is no dramatized realization of what these troubles are. They are simply stated, like items in a feminist pamphlet.

The odd fact is that, though Wertmüller is trying to say something about the perplexities of modern women, whatever characterization she achieves is with the husband. No, it's not so odd. Wertmüller knows him, knows that he's no less a male-chauvinist Italian husband for being a Communist. (Even, he boasts, a Stalinist. This last, which doesn't exactly help our sympathy, is just mentioned and dropped. The Communism, in the light of the news, needs no explanation; the Stalinism does.) But Wertmüller clearly does not know anything about the American woman: the character comes out conventional, undifferentiated, unexplored. We don't even know, really, what life the woman is being kept *from*. One shot of Bergen leaving the *San Francisco Chronicle* building is supposed to cover everything. (It was only from a later interview that I learned the woman is a photographer.) The husband is a compound of some intimacies—Wertmüller's knowledge of Italian men and of Giannini's range. What there is of the woman comes entirely from the performance that she has got from Bergen, but it's a lot of emotional expenditure on a writer's dummy.

What makes the central weakness even more obvious is the feverish décor with which it's surrounded, as if something really momentous were being born. There's a recurrent chorus, a Fellinian gallery of overdressed women and a lesbian and eccentric men, all of whom hover symbolically in the bedroom and in other places, commenting in pseudo-profundities about the main pseudo-profundity. They and the married pair are rolled in a thick visual crust created by the cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno and the editor Franco Fraticelli according to a Wertmüller recipe, puffed up to conceal the emptiness. Examples: zooms on statues or paintings or photographs, whether pertinent or not; close-ups so intense you can see the down on Bergen's cheeks; hyperdramatic lighting that often silhouettes the characters in full black against a dim light.

In her best previous pictures Wertmüller's very conscious style was a luscious way of providing a needed aesthetic distance. Here there is little for which we need such distance. Her ostensible subject is a troubled marriage. Her real subject is a worse marriage—between her and her American producers. This first offspring bodes badly. Wertmüller is not Bergman, but she's good enough to merit the same advice. She should, in every sense, go home.

***Violette*, Claude Chabrol, 1978** (*The New Republic*,
14 October 1978)

A speculative subject for a film-school seminar in criticism: Describe Claude Chabrol's dreams. Almost all of this prolific French director's output has been awash in blood—not horror-film blood or gangster-film blood but family or sexual murder. Let's call it domestic blood. Does he dream of new ways to film murder? Does he smile in his sleep? It's possible, because he is as lithe and graceful, as innocent in his filmmaking, as a dolphin leaping in the sea. The only trouble with this dolphin is that, sometimes when blood makes him leap, he comes down on a rock. As now.

The misfire in *Violette* (1978) is in a misperception of the center of his script. It's based on the life of Violette Nozière, a French girl celebrated (that's the word) in the 1930s for the murder of her father and the attempted murder of her mother. She became a heroine of the surrealists, had poems written about her (by Paul Éluard, among others), was sentenced to die, had her sentence commuted to life imprisonment, and was finally pardoned by, of all people, de Gaulle when he was president. The film tells her story up to the imprisonment, but it misses the two elements that might have made it register, both of which are clear in my favorite Chabrol film, *Landru* (1963). We are not made to feel *with* Violette so that we participate in her acts; she is not "placed" so that we can see her as a product of contemporary disorders.

As for the first, the real Violette said that her father had raped her when she was thirteen and ever since had repeatedly forced her to have intercourse with him. Nothing like that in the film: just a few lickerish glances by dad at her breasts. What we see is merely the teenaged daughter of poor parents, living with them in a very cramped Paris apartment, sleeping in the one room other than the parents' bedroom, having to listen to them whack away in bed every night, setting herself up in a secret separate apartment where by day she entertains lovers of her own. She pays the rent, not by prostitution, as some think, but by blackmailing a rich man, her real father, who once had a fling with her mother.

Violette is shown to be stupid, selfish, and, until she falls in love, rather lazily sensual instead of consumed, a girl who gives new meaning to the old word “slut.” Eventually she contracts syphilis. She poisons her parents with pills that she tells them are medicine the doctor prescribed to protect *them*. When she comes home and finds them both stretched on the floor—where she put them—Violette throws up. All I could think was: Poor kid.

As for the second matter, Chabrol simply tacks on some lines at the end to say that Violette was taken up by the literary set. The reasons are not inferable. One can understand the “popularity” of Landru, who reasoned that his method of supporting his beloved family—bogus marriages, then murder of the rich wives—was no more wicked than the First World War that people around him were cheering. Violette is not much more than an animal and, like animals, utterly libidinous. Poets hailed her as some sort of symbol of Absurdity. Not shown. But then French intellectuals like to find point in pointless or insane murder. In the early 1960s Nikos Papatakis made a film called *Les Abysses* (1963), a skillful but merely clinical film about the Papin sisters, the murder case that was the inspiration for Genet’s *The Maids* (1947). Genet’s play may be the best example we have of the Artaudian theater of cruelty, a marvelous work; but Papatakis’s film deals only with the raw source. It was nonetheless hailed as a tragic masterwork by Sartre, Beauvoir, Breton, and others. On Chabrol’s evidence, Violette-as-surrealist is equally farfetched.

Chabrol has said that he made his film in what he takes to be 1930s style, with no latter-day technical devices like zoom lenses, that he would have made it in black-and-white except that this would have limited the financial take. I don’t quite see how his rather convoluted modern playing with time in the structure of *Violette* conforms to this traditional 1930s intent; still, in terms of sheer control, the picture is in the palm of his hand.

The beautiful Stéphane Audran (Madame Chabrol) gives the most interesting performance, as the working-class mother—if one has seen her in her customary *soigné* roles. Jean Carmet, the girl’s father in the underrated *Don’t Cry with Your Mouth Full* (1973), is all right as the girl’s father here. A greater mystery to me than the import of Violette herself is the success of Isabelle Huppert, who plays the girl. She played the quasi-catatonic heroine of *The Lacemaker* (1977) a few years ago and impressed many, including Chabrol. She plays the quasi-catatonic Violette more or less the same way—allowing for some moments of adoration of her lover. I think that what we are supposed to see in Huppert is a self-generative film icon in the making, the kind of performer whose presence, more than talent, stimulates the imagination. Well, not mine. It happens for me with, say, Alain Delon because his “mask” seems *arrived* at, a mastery of things he is thinking and

feeling. Huppert strikes me as blank, or at most petty. The matter is worsened because, as her lover, Chabrol has cast Jean-François Garreud, who is presumably seen as a new Delon. Nix.

***The Marriage of Maria Braun*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1979** (*The New Republic*, 29 September 1979)

Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the still- young German director, is an ace example of that sad modern phenomenon, the talent looking for works. Until well into this century there seemed to be no fissures between the artist—of whatever rank—and his work. J. M. W. Turner or Luke Fildes, George Eliot or Marie Corelli, Johannes Brahms or Joachim Raff, artist and art seemed to go together like body and skin. But how often these days we feel about an artist, “If only he got the right ideas, how good he would be.” Occasionally Fassbinder strikes it lucky (apparently the right phrase): he makes an *Effi Briest* (1974) or a *Jail Bait* (1973). Most of the time, however, as in the recently released *Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?* (1970), *Satan’s Brew* (1976), and his first English-language film, 1978’s *Despair* (even though it was adapted from the Nabokov novel, from 1934), there’s a sense of a real ability with greased fingers—the form of the work keeps slipping through them.

It happens again in *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979). The film isn’t one minute old before we know we’re in the hands of a skilled, unhackneyed director. The first thing we see is a picture of Hitler hanging on a wall. An explosion. The picture disappears, and through a hole blown in the wall, we see a German soldier and a girl in bridal costume whose wedding has been interrupted by aerial bombs. If that isn’t succinct and graphic filmmaking, what in the world is?

And the film goes on, cinematically speaking, at that high level of selection and invention. Occasionally it lapses: when we watch a couple leave a house across the street and the camera pans to a parked car in the foreground, we know before we see him that there’s a man in the car watching the pair. It’s a strophe that ought to be left to TV thrillers. Mostly the film is made with freshness and precision.

But what for? What was Fassbinder being so good *about*? The script is by Peter Märthesheimer and Pea Fröhlich (she wrote a book about the American avant-garde theater several years ago), with help from Fassbinder: it tells the story of that bride, who spends just one night with her husband before he leaves. After the war, she hears that he’s been killed. She gets otherwise involved. He returns, and goes to jail for killing the (black) American soldier by whom she’s pregnant,

although it was she who broke a bottle over the soldier's head. Later, Maria gets involved with a rich businessman, although she keeps insisting—as she has done all along—that she still loves Braun and is his wife. When Braun is released from prison, he leaves Germany for a while because (we later learn) the rich man is dying and persuades Braun to let Maria be with him until he dies. Braun returns after the rich man's death. He and Maria are enriched by the dead man's will. An explosion occurs with a gas stove. Braun and Maria are blown up, fulfilling (I guess) the opening in which they were blown apart.

Now these are the details of a bizarre comedy or of a melodramatic romance, full of arbitrary turns. (Why is Maria so gifted at business, for instance?) But Fassbinder treats the story as if it were an epic of its era: stylistically, with picaresque asstringency filled out at high points; atmospherically, with a freight of significant detail, like the successive pictures of all the postwar German chancellors that are shown to us after the final explosion. Why? The struggle for survival in postwar Germany is vivid in early parts, but most of the story does nothing centrally about the *Wirtschaftswunder* or about anything political or social. We get the adventures of a clever, pretty, cool woman, a soap opera held together with accidents and steered by the authors' dicta, no kind of historical epitome at all.

It's a puzzle, with one possible partial explanation. As is known, Fassbinder venerates Douglas Sirk. Sirk, born Detlev Sierck in Hamburg in 1900, had an extensive career as dramaturg and director of distinguished plays before he went into films; immigrated to Hollywood in 1937; made there a wide variety of films but mostly melodramas; returned to Germany in the early 1960s and resumed a theater career, directing distinguished plays. In 1957 Sirk made a film called *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (1958), adapted from a 1954 Remarque novel about postwar Germany, an American-produced film shot entirely on location. Of this picture Sirk said: "A strange kind of love story. ... Two people are not allowed to have their love. The murderous breath of circumstances prevents them." In conjecture, Fassbinder, also a man of both theater and film, envies Sirk his American phase, his pop period, and, out of a different base, has tried to emulate it. But the result is neither sound high art nor sound pop art—just one more display of talent in an unfulfilled work.

All the more disappointing because it's well acted. Hanna Schygulla, who has been with Fassbinder since his earliest theater days, is surgically attractive as Maria. If you remember Schygulla as Effi Briest, you get an extra pleasure from her palette here. Klaus Löwitsch, the Braun, is hardbitten as a man who has learned to expect nothing but is not whipped. Ivan Desny fills out the portrait of a cultivated, melancholic businessman that he sketched in *The Wrong Move* (1975), a Wim Wenders-Peter Handke film. Like his colleagues, Desny gives a performance too substantial for the use that the script makes of it.

Nosferatu, Werner Herzog, 1979 (*The New Republic*, 27 October 1979)

I can't think of another actor on earth who could do what Klaus Kinski does in *Nosferatu* (1979). As Count Dracula, his head is shaven, he has two fangs in the front of his upper jaw, his ears are built out like batwings, his fingernails are as long as his hands; and despite this horror-film get-up, he acts—and convinces. Most performers of grotesque roles in horror films wear their make-ups the way that clowns wear theirs: the make-up itself virtually is the performance. But Kinski evidently views his make-up for Dracula as he did the make-ups for Aguirre and Woyzeck—as an external aid to a performance begun within. He seems to be unaware that he is in a horror film: this is simply the way this “undead” creature looks, and the look—to Kinski—is the least of it. His Dracula is a being, a tormented being whose utterances about his centuries of pain, his longing for death, his love of dark and loneliness have the credibility of bizarre fiction—that is, they feel like canted extensions of tremors we have felt in our own lives.

If Kinski's innate hint of madness put him at a disadvantage in *Woyzeck* (1979), twisted the very foundation of an epitomic mass-man, it serves him well in *Nosferatu*. In *The Seven-Year Itch* (1955) Marilyn Monroe went to see a horror flick called *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) and came out teary-eyed, saying that she felt sorry for the creature. I can't quite say the same about this Dracula, but Kinski at least convinces me that Dracula is suffering.

And more in this film is good—Bruno Ganz, as the young man who travels to Transylvania to see the count and is victimized by him, invests the part with his still-engaging air of weathered melancholy. (No explanations are given for the role's English name, Jonathan Harker, or the fact that his home town, supposedly German, is, which any Vermeer fan can see, Delft.) As his wife, Isabelle Adjani, whose Victorian beauty helped to sustain Truffaut's *Story of Adèle H.* (1975), here strikes the note of an earlier romance, the Gothic. And near the end she gets a chance to be something more than either loving or terrified.

This film was remade, from F. W. Murnau's famous *Nosferatu* (1922), by Werner Herzog, the extraordinary German director who made *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) and *Woyzeck*. I haven't seen Murnau's film in some years so I can't make comparisons: in itself, Herzog's film is sturdy with commitment—that's its chief attribute according to Beverly Walker, an American who worked with Herzog on the picture and wrote about her experience (*Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1978), particularly underscoring the feeling of collaboration between Herzog and his “team.” (Some of the minor actors are recognizable from earlier Herzog films; the cinematographer is again Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein.) Everyone whose work is visible, either in person or in effect, apparently believed in the project.

Herzog clearly feels a special affinity with early nineteenth-century Germany, the period in which Caspar David Friedrich was the preeminent painter, the period of *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), of *Woyzeck*, of *Nosferatu*. The pellucid air, the dainty neatness of the households, the serenity overlying the anguished idealism, all these engage Herzog's eye and mind. Those qualities and Ganz's encounter with gypsies on his way through wild mountains are the best directorial elements in the film: Herzog seems more at ease with them than with the supposedly macabre sequences in Dracula's castle.

Some other elements are notable. Herzog uses rats, thousands of them, scurrying through streets, around people—Adjani walks through a huge squeaking pack of them in one scene. It's a facile effect ("Bring on the rats!"), but it works, as crawly evidence of the plague that Dracula brings with him to the city. And the scene in which Adjani gives her life to destroy Dracula by keeping him at her bedside drinking *her* blood until cockcrow—daylight will kill him—has a touch of sexual-heroic drama, validated by both her and Kinski. And this is followed by Herzog's pessimistic ending. Upstairs in Adjani's bedroom, Kinski dies as sunlight touches him. Downstairs, Ganz, still demented and dazed by his experience in Transylvania, metamorphoses, becomes a new embodiment of *Nosferatu* the vampire to replace the dead Dracula upstairs. The evil is dead; the evil lives.

But to detail this picture's accomplishments is finally a sorry business because they all come to so little. We're being told by some that this is not a horror film. Well, then, what is it? Not even good acting like that found in most performances here, not even direction as good as Herzog's best moments, can exalt *Nosferatu*. Its Christian parable is wonky; its psychosexual implications are factitious; its social symbolism is thin. Worse, none of these possible subtexts coheres because none is genuinely intended. At the last *Nosferatu* is only a tale to make the flesh creep, if it can—a superior eerie entertainment.

Postscript. I've now had the chance to see again Murnau's *Nosferatu*. Herzog's new version wins over it hands (or claws) down. (The word "Nosferatu," says Lotte Eisner, was the Serbian term for the "undead.") Many of Murnau's images are deep and mysterious, but the picture as a whole today seems skimpy. Herzog's use of the plague-stricken city, of the gypsies and mountain peasants, of the young wife's selfless devotion, is much more telling. And Murnau's cast is simply not in the same league as Herzog's. One reviewer said that Klaus Kinski played Max Schreck, Murnau's *Nosferatu*, rather than *Nosferatu* himself. This comment is incomprehensible to me. Schreck is exactly what Kinski is not—an actor in a get-up, displaying it as ordered by the director. Kinski acts.

Nor is this a prejudice toward sound and color films. By coincidence, recently I also saw again Murnau's *Faust* (1926) and was once more stunned by its authority and beauty. It grows. *Nosferatu* shrinks.

Kramer vs. Kramer, Robert Benton, 1979

(*The New Republic*, 22 December 1979)

Let's take a look at what a crackerjack cast—first-class all the way—can do for a middling contemporary drama. *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), based on a 1977 novel by Avery Corman, was written by Robert Benton, who also directed. I don't know the book: the script tells, in lithe dialogue, the story of a New York couple who split. The struggle is not about the divorce, which as such is never glimpsed; it's about the custody of their small son. The drawing of the characters is adequate, possibly excepting the wife, who is off-screen a good deal of the time. Her inner crisis, which is why she leaves, and her recovery are more matters of report than enactment. All the people go through expected difficulties the way that runners take the hurdles in a track event: no surprise in it, it's just a question of how they do it. The anatomy and engagement of the script are those of a television drama bellying up to reality.

But the actors make it more. It's an old plaint of critics that good actors do much of the writing for lesser authors, fleshing out characters that have only been sketched. That's not quite the case here. As written, Benton's characters are clear enough but are a set of samples. The actors provide the dimensions of travail and grief, and of humor, that turn commonplace incidents of fiction into unique yet representative experiences.

Dustin Hoffman, the husband, is back in form—a new and better form, in fact. Early in his film career he was splendid in *The Graduate* (1967) and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969); then he began to seesaw between sleeping and waking—comatose in *Papillon* (1973) and *John Loves Mary* (1969), for instance, awake in *Lenny* (1974) and *Agatha* (1979). And in *Straight Time* (1978) he leaned on a kind of screen presence, strong and silent, that he doesn't have. (He does have his own kind.) In *Kramer vs. Kramer* his role is uncomplicated, a man of likes and dislikes carefully arranged to make him both individual and “average”; but Hoffman burns through the givens into the unknowns even in this “average” man. His playing with his child; his patience, true and enforced, with his child; his “office” affection for his boss; his genuine affection for the woman in the apartment below who helps him; his fight for his child, in an emergency operating room and in court—all these and more stab deeper than mere credibility to the community that

good acting provides. Hoffman unites us with him and with one another, tacitly but well. And all of this is based on a furious energy, as it was in *Lenny* and *Agatha*: what I'd call the drive of a talented small man. It's an energy that both James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson had in their own ways, an energy that probably has its source in psychic compensation but, in a gifted man, it quickly becomes authentic in itself.

To continue the old-star comparison: Meryl Streep, the wife, is today's Bette Davis, or could be if there were now an equivalent film industry. Streep is first an actress, a much less mannered and self-centered actress than Davis but with Davis's qualities of unconventional beauty and of reliance on acting as much as on starriness—the woman star who really acts and does it in differing roles. Think of Streep as the airy Southern rich lawyer in *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1979) and as the supermarket worker in *The Deer Hunter* (1978), sitting in the stock room stamping prices on items and crying softly. Age allowing, Davis could have done things like that.

But I vastly prefer Streep. In *Kramer vs. Kramer* she plays a somewhat neurotic woman whose dissatisfaction with marriage drives her out, leaving her son, ten minutes into the film and who returns—about a film-hour later, I'd guess—when she has herself in hand and wants to reclaim her son. Obviously the brief appearance at the beginning had to be strong enough to make her a continuing presence and to give her a foothold after she returns. Streep handles this difficulty easily, by concentrating on the truth of the woman and by having the talent for that concentration. I've been waiting for some years now—nastily, I guess—for Streep to make a false move on stage or screen in widely varied characters. I'm still waiting. So much for nastiness.

There's a traditional role in the theater dubbed “Charles, His Friend,” which of course has a female counterpart—the confidant(e) of the protagonist. Jane Alexander seems born to be an extraordinarily good “Charles.” I've seen her in a lot of plays and films, romantic or strident or maturely feminine roles, and in all of them she has lacked sex and shine—central and centering power. What she can supply is intelligence and, within domestic limits, reliable sensitivity. She has never been better than as the woman downstairs in *Kramer vs. Kramer*—no standard soap-opera understanding “Charles” even by the new soap-opera standards, a reinforcer of the drama though not one of its assets.

Howard Duff is a late bloomer—re-bloomer, really. He reappeared (for me, anyway), after a long absence, as the family doctor in *A Wedding* (1978). Here, as Hoffman's lawyer in the vicious custody fight, he enriches the screen. With gray wings on his head and an elegant gray moustache, with juicy voice and silver-headed cane, prowling the courtroom or sitting in a bar with an absolutely

apt tumbler of neat whiskey before him, Duff embodies the Irish-American historian who, in life even more than in the theater, has done much to brighten the landscape.

Even the small part of a woman in Hoffman's advertising agency who spends a night with him is well cast. The attractive JoBeth Williams, now in the Off-Broadway *Ladyhouse Blues* (1977), has a comic scene to play naked: on the way to the bathroom she encounters Hoffman's small son, who is supposed to be asleep. Williams does it wittily.

And this brings us to a recurrent mystery/miracle. All through film history, some directors who have nothing else in common have been able to get good performances from children. I don't mean from child stars like Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Shirley Temple, and Margaret O'Brien—small monsters who apparently were professional prenatally and could deliver. I mean directors who got good performances from children under ten who never did anything else: Benoît-Lévy (*La Maternelle* [1933], *Ballerina* [1937]), De Sica (*The Bicycle Thief* [1948]), Truffaut (*The Wild Child* [1970]), and Ritt (*Conrack* [1974]), to name just a few. Now Benton's name must be added. Justin Henry, about six when the film was started, had not acted before. With Benton's help, and surely with Hoffman's and Streep's help, the boy goes through as wide a range of scenes as he could possibly be asked for, and he is true, absolutely true, every moment. He's enchanting. And the mystery of how it's done—which probably begins with a very acute casting sense, a "smell" of possible response and imagination—that mystery goes on.

Nestor Almendros, a master, did the cinematography, but he didn't need to. Outside of the exquisite opening sequence, which begins with a burnished close-up of Streep, the cinematography could have been done adequately by any competent man. The music is mostly a Vivaldi mandolin concerto, which is "planted" in the film by a shot of two New York street musicians playing it and which dresses the soundtrack neatly. (Did you know that, in nice weather, Fifth Avenue at night is now a series of recital halls? In one shop doorway after another, soloists and various small groups play, for contributions.)

Benton's direction must first be praised for his choice of actors and his collaboration with them. This is his first serious film: previously he directed *Bad Company* (1972) and *The Late Show* (1977), both heavily comic. Here he's dealing with heartbreak, even though it's seen through a temper of quick comedy, and his hand is just and right. He does well with the interiors of scenes, the movement of actors and camera, the internal cuts. My one quarrel is with the overall editing, the joining of sequences. I'm always conscious of his cutting away for time-lapses, beginning with an early insert of garbage trucks—after Streep walks out—to tell us that a night has passed. And too often, at the end of the sequence, Benton cuts or

fades to black. This device, once common, is now relatively rare and should stay rare. No one wants to be jolted to consciousness of the screen itself while watching a film, unless that moment of black, that consciousness of the screen's existence, is itself part of the film, as it sometimes has been in Bergman. I can't remember any instance of black in *Kramer vs. Kramer* where the film couldn't simply have cut ahead to the next sequence, perhaps holding the opening shot of the new sequence a few frames longer to let us get our bearings.

But Benton has made a good vernacular film that, because of its acting and its urban detail more than its story or writing, is what I'd call a time-capsule work. Compare it with Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979), which—funny lines, lush photography, and all—made an attempt at a large embrace of New York, an attempt to enclose its current styles and behavior in a paean to the city; and failed because of the script's flickering vision and the cast's inadequacies (except Meryl Streep, who was in that one, too): Benton's film makes no attempt to sing the city, but it fastens so tight a grip on some city lives that the city they live in can't escape. Put *Kramer vs. Kramer*, not *Manhattan*, in the time capsule, and if it is dug up centuries from now, it will report some truth about the city today—flavor, quirk, pain, and maneuver, and the wry comedy in which they all seem to be set.

***American Gigolo*, Paul Schrader, 1980** (*The New Republic*, 1 March 1980)

Paul Schrader wants to be a serious filmmaker. One of his principal models is Robert Bresson, whom Schrader wrote about in his book *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972) and whom he interviewed illuminatingly in *Film Comment* (September–October 1977). From Bresson, Schrader has apparently taken the germinal idea of the sexually sordid as an arena for spiritual agon, an idea that Bresson got from one of his models, Dostoevsky. In *Taxi Driver* (1976), which Schrader wrote, a psychopath, obsessed with the purging of filth, tries to rescue a trapped child prostitute. In *Hardcore* (1979), which Schrader wrote and directed, a man rescues his daughter who has sunk into the pornographic film world. Now Schrader has written and directed *American Gigolo* (1980), where the protagonist himself is a prostitute.

Very little in the film is sensational. Schrader wanted to show us the life of a good-looking young man in Beverly Hills who makes a comfy living by providing sex to, mostly, wealthy women and who takes his profession seriously as a means of solace for those in need. Love has not figured in his life; when it appears, it rearranges his values. The material isn't hopeless, but the film doesn't succeed because of several misfires.

The first is Richard Gere in the central role. Gere, now on Broadway in Martin Sherman's *Bent* (1979), is good-looking in a freehand, unarticulated way, but the closest he can come to depth is earnestness. His inadequacy is underscored by that of Lauren Hutton as the rich wife who is first his client, then his lover. Hutton, who used to be an advertising model trying to act, is now a fading advertising model trying to act. Better casting could have helped this film somewhat, the way John Travolta, in a comparable stud role, helped a little the abysmal *Moment by Moment* (1978).

Schrader's script simply doesn't provide a drama of realization, however. I don't mean a "come to realize" ending; I mean the sort of theme addressed in Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959): realization of what it means spiritually to live outside conventional morality, the risks of *enlightenment* that it can entail. All that happens in *American Gigolo* is the plot. Gere gets framed for a murder charge, goes through hell, and finally kills the man who framed him—although he changes his mind after he pushes the man over a balcony railing and tries to save him. This last looks like a producer's afterthought to keep Gere looking good. Someone sees him try belatedly to save the man so he escapes a second murder rap. But the whole idea of real sin replacing false imputation of it is thus destroyed.

Schrader directs fairly well, but he lays on color filters a bit too freely, making scenes dominantly red or blue. Inserts of empty topography—a rooftop, a street—suggestive of the Japanese filmmaker Ozu, who is also in Schrader's book, are egregious, part of the picture he didn't make. I wouldn't rush to condemn Schrader for selling out his picture because I'm not sure he could have made it in any case. All that *American Gigolo* contains is a hint of serious ambition.

***Heaven's Gate*, Michael Cimino, 1980** (*The New Republic*, 13 December 1980 & 16 May 1981)

Anyone with the smallest interest must know by now that Michael Cimino's new film cost around \$40 million, runs (with intermission) over four hours, and was yanked out of theaters after press screenings and a few public showings. Most press reports say that Cimino initiated the withdrawal, but there's no hint that he met with resistance from the distributors, United Artists. Those of us who saw the picture may in time form a band of survivors, larger than those who saw Stroheim's uncut *Greed* in January 1924 but with bonds of sympathy, if not of shared privilege.

Since the film is being revised for re-release next year, criticism is out of order. This much can be said: condensation, even rearrangement, could easily help but can't cure. What's at least equally needed is footage to put in. Unless Cimino has

outtakes that he thought he didn't need, material that can clarify narrative and characterization, the result is just going to be a smaller blob. Gorgeous, but a blob.

Cimino got a green light on *Heaven's Gate* (1980) because of the success of his previous film, *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and once the new project was started, it was hard to stop, I guess. The case is not unique. One prior example: earlier this year we saw another disaster that a director was empowered to make because his previous film was a smash. Steven Spielberg followed *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) with *1941* (1979). Commercially the only substantive difference between *1941* and *Heaven's Gate* is that United Artists cut their losses quickly, while Spielberg's producers sloshed on further into the red.

It's the drama of the withdrawal, not the fact of the (*pro tem*) loss, that's impressive. In film and in the commercial theater, big losses go on all the time. *Variety* and *The New York Times* are forever telling us about the booming grosses of Broadway; what they don't often mention are the booming losses: money down the drain every season on flops—not just shows that open and fail but shows that go into previews and close before opening, or close out of town, or close after getting well along in rehearsals. All these approximate the Cimino episode, on a smaller but analogous scale.

I'm not inclined to exculpate Cimino: *Heaven's Gate*, as shown, is the work of a gifted man spaced out on ego. But there's another person who needs to be looked at. In this situation, which is a finance situation, what about the financier? The producer. I don't mean the executive(s) responsible for daily activity in the film-making, but the person(s) responsible for the prime decision to finance the project. Part of the Hollywood trouble today, apparently, is that those two offices are not the same.

The insufficiently sung hero/villain of film history is the producer. Directors—John Ford, for chief example—have always complained about them, but some producers had style and taste and chose projects that displayed keen showmanship and distinctive flavor. Whoever the director was, we usually knew when we were seeing a Samuel Goldwyn or Sam Spiegel film. Goldwyn films tended to have luxe and restrained sentimentality, Spiegel's tended to have contemporary pertinence expressed on a hyperdramatic scale.

Now most of the very top people seem to wait for someone to approach them with projects; then they do or do not sign checks. They make bets. They have about as much to do with the making of the film as the purchaser of a five-dollar pari-mutuel ticket has to do with the training and racing of horses. In both cases, the losing investor beefs. In both cases, his moral equity seems to be about the same.

I'm not arguing for producer-ridden directors. I'm arguing for sufficient expertness in producers to be able to help as needed. At the least, they have small right to dump on a misguided director whom they have not been able to help, or

to convince that he needed help. On the basis of *The Deer Hunter*, there was no reason to believe that Cimino could make an organically sound film. His producers were persuaded by receipts and Academy Awards. On those criteria they bet; and they lost. (So far.)

In every filmmaking situation in the world, the producer—or the cadre chief in communist countries, or whatever his title may be—is the publicly unacknowledged begetter. In Hollywood, as the stakes rise, his decisions are increasingly nerve-racking; and as the stakes rise, he seems to be less and less of a film collaborator, more and more a maker of bets. If *Heaven's Gate* had succeeded, its backers, I admit, would not have shared much of the glory. But in the disaster, I maintain, the people who approved the script, then did nothing but sign more and more checks, should not be allowed to make Cimino take all the lumps.

* * *

Heaven's Gate, the very expensive film that made history by being yanked after a week, is now back in a condensed and clarified version. It has been reduced from four hours with intermission to a straight two-and-a-half hours. One bit of voice-over narration by the star Kris Kristofferson has been added, as have several subtitles that explain shifts of scene and lapses of time. The only substantive change comes at the very end. Now *Heaven's Gate* can at least be sat through, and it provides an aggregate of about an hour's pleasure. Its generally failed ambitions are at least now lucid, and its few virtues are much stronger.

Kristofferson graduates in 1870 from Harvard (filmed at Oxford) and goes through a lot of Commencement Day shenanigans that, though sparser now, are still disproportionate to their relevance. (All that was needed was to establish that he came from a good family, was well educated, had an English pal, and met a girl—five minutes, tops.) Twenty years later Kristofferson is the marshal of Johnson County, Wyoming, because—as the added narration explains—he was troubled by injustices in the land. There he is embroiled in the Johnson County wars. The Stockgrowers' Association, wealthy and politically powerful, of which Kristofferson's English pal is now inexplicably a member, sets out to murder 125 male immigrants from Germany and eastern Europe. These immigrant families, bilked of the farmlands that they were promised and that brought them here, are starving, and the men have been stealing cattle in order to feed their wives and children. The Association brands them anarchists and lawbreakers (they *are* lawbreakers, of course) and hires gunmen. Kristofferson stands to keep the law, legal process, not to defend rustlers. Christopher Walken is one of the leading gunmen for the Association, and there's a suggestion that he's a renegade—one of the Europeans says, "You look like one of us."

The subject is sharp, hopeless, pertinent. Have hungry men the right to steal? Does a country that wants cheap labor—which means too many people on hand for the work available—have the right to lure the labor and then disregard the unemployed? Set against the ranging Wyoming skies and mountains, this film might have been a hard bite out of American promises. But Cimino, who wrote his own script, has bogged down his pertinent truth with Movieland cliché. To give his historical-economic drama a core of “human interest,” he makes Kristofferson and Walken both lovers of a young French madam (Isabelle Huppert) who runs a log-cabin brothel and accepts cattle, some of them stolen, as well as cash for her staff’s services. How Huppert, looking as young and fresh as she did in *The Lacer-maker* (1977), got to Johnson County and set herself up in business is something that Cimino didn’t pause to explain even in the four-hour version.

Out of this phony, falsely candid triangle develops a cardboard drama that tends to mask the real drama; and that real drama isn’t helped by the ever less tolerable, pipsqueaky Sam Waterston as the leader of the Association. But a really grave, basic error was the use of Vilmos Zsigmond as cinematographer. Zsigmond’s work has always tended to the gauzy and soft, sometimes appropriately, but always riskily in Westerns (*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* [1971], *The Hired Hand* [1971]), where he lays on an aesthetic shimmer that fights the hard material. Never worse than here in *Heaven’s Gate*. The general sepia and gold tonalities, the incessant side-wise filtering of sunlight through windows and shutters, the consistently syrupy lighting—all convert the harshness and immediacy that this history ought to have into prettiness. Apparently Cimino was so in love with this Zsigmond prettiness that even when the picture was being rigorously re-cut, the director retained one long sequence that aches for excision, a long waltz by Kristofferson and Huppert on a huge deserted dance floor.

The film’s very last sequence has, if I’m remembering rightly, been drastically revised through editing. Originally it showed Kristofferson, returned to his social class, on his immense yacht, brooding Byronically on deck, then going below to join his sleeping wife, presumably the girl he had met at the Harvard graduation ball. Now, after a title that tells us twenty years have elapsed and that we are off Newport, Rhode Island, we see the yacht, then we see Kristofferson brooding below deck, with a flashback of the killing of Huppert; then there’s a shot of him brooding on deck. No wife. In the new version the Harvard girl is all the more superfluous and the ending a little less callous: Kristofferson is being gallantly faithful to Huppert’s memory.

As an actor Kristofferson is like a sausage machine, grinding it out, but it’s a tasty macho product. Walken is helped by the condensation of the film, chiefly because his one big love scene was cut. I’m a tremendous admirer of Walken’s

talent, but overt sexual passion is not his strongest screen asset. The original version had a scene in which he sat next to Huppert on her bed, leaned over, and kissed her bare back. I thought it must have frozen her. The conjunction of Kristofferson and Walken raises yet again the star versus actor question. A valid star need not be much of an actor—e.g., Kristofferson. A good actor may not be real star material—e.g., Walken. Comparison between the two as artists cannot be made: Walken is an artist, Kristofferson is an attractive person.

But, as Walken showed in *Dogs of War* (1980) and again here, he may lack the sheer width of personality and heat of sexual attraction to be a star. In the theater, where acting itself can supersede certain innate personality limitations, Walken has shown in plays as various as *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) and *Measure for Measure* (1604) and *The Seagull* (1896) that he can choose his territory and inhabit it. In film, the ranges—for leading men, not character actors—tend to be somewhat narrower. The camera likes, needs, to do some of the creating that the actor does on stage. On screen, Walken's characteristics and personality may make him more effective when he is not central, which is the case here and in *The Deer Hunter*, than when he has to carry the film, as in *Dogs of War*.

In any case, the long bore of *Heaven's Gate* has been converted into a tolerable non-success.

***The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Bob Rafelson, 1981**

(*The New Republic*, 11 April 1981)

Cloning may be new in science, but it's old in Hollywood. Got a successful star? Clone him or her. Sigourney Weaver is patently being groomed to be another Jane Fonda. You don't have to adore everything Fonda has done to be mild about Weaver's chances. Now comes Jessica Lange, first noted in the remake of *King Kong* (1976), whom some apparently see as a new Faye Dunaway. Lange can wear clingy cheap clothes provocatively, she has blunt sensual features, so in her new film she is put through a lot of sweat and sultriness to remind us of the early Bonnie in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). But Dunaway—sometimes, anyway—is an actress of sustained power. No hint of this yet from Lange.

Her new film is another remake, from James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934)—which makes eight rings because this is the fourth filming. The French did one in 1939, Visconti did one in Italy during World War II (without authorization; his producers may have been banking on an Axis victory so there'd never be trouble about the rights), and there's the Lana Turner-John Garfield version from 1946. The French version is the only one I haven't seen, but

it would have to be abysmal to be the worst of the four, because this new attempt is very bad.

We get a hint of this before we see anything. Under the credits Michael Small's music is so schmaltzy that it makes Max Steiner sound like Monteverdi. Yes, the picture is set in the 1930s, but nothing else in the film is intrinsically reflexive, so it's hard to believe that this hokey music is meant to set the period. Besides, later on when Jack Nicholson forces Lange to their first sexual encounter on a kitchen table, the music idles along with quiet lyricism. It's one of the worst film scores of recent times—say, the past month.

Nicholson is almost becoming a clone of himself. Since *Easy Rider* (1969), by no means his first picture, he has, almost alternately, shown and hidden great talent. His wool-capped clever maniac in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) is one of the deeply etched icons in the American film gallery. But in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981) he looks a good deal of the time as if he hadn't recovered from the *Cuckoo's Nest* lobotomy: his forehead seems to have moved permanently closer to his eyebrows—an impression fostered by his furrowed feeble imitations of his previous force. He seems to be trying to remember how good he once was and how he got that way; he seems to be leaning on our memory of his past work. In short, his own clone.

The role of the stud vagabond, as written here, is stock; and Nicholson makes not one move to nudge it past platitude. Here he is, again (we feel), the raunchy footloose male, attractive through irresponsibility, who has raised hell with marriages in innumerable novels and films and plays. In a picture whose very being depends on our conviction that two people are drowning helplessly in a sexual tide, what we get are puppets—the musky wife, the fond-blind husband, the crotchty newcomer—taking up traditional positions and going through mechanical strophes.

David Mamet, who wrote the adaptation, has poured out theater plays in the last five or six years, two of which—*The Water Engine* (1976) and *American Buffalo* (1975)—were good enough to raise expectations on my part. Dashed. Admittedly, Cain's novel is not so good as one remembers: some of the writing lapses out of tension into slush. ("I kissed her. Her eyes were shining up at me like two blue stars. It was like being in church.") But it has two qualities that still hold. The structure is like an arrow flight, except for the episode with the puma-hunting girl (which is worsened in the film). And Cain is careful to make his lovers pathetic—not sympathetic, which would kill it—but pathetic victims of moral weakness. Mamet's screenplay hashes up both these qualities. The structure is tugged out of shape (an episode in a bus station, for instance); the line of the lovers' involvement is zigged and zagged; and nothing of the woman's past is clarified. Puppets are

what they start as and remain. And some of the dialogue is quaint. “You scum,” Lange says to Nicholson, the man with whom she has planned and committed her husband’s murder.

And the “twice” of the title is left out. The quintessential irony of the story is that a man who commits murder and gets away with it is later found guilty of a killing he did not commit. (It’s the same twist as in C. S. Forester’s *Payment Deferred*, which was written earlier—in 1926.) But this film ends with Lange’s accidental death in a car smash, with nothing of what follows. The implication is less than faint that Nicholson will be arrested for murdering her, will be tried and executed.

But maybe that castrated ending was the director’s idea, not Mamet’s. The director was Bob Rafelson, and the film is another slope on *his* toboggan slide. His first film, *Head* (1968), had some zany charm. His next, *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), showed that he had really serious possibilities. Next came *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), which showed only imitative seriousness, then *Stay Hungry* (1976), which stayed hungry. Still, though it was hard to expect first-line work from Rafelson any longer, he showed enough verve so that some good program pictures still seemed possible. But he sank *The Postman Always Rings Twice* with ineptitude and cheapness.

He engaged Ingmar Bergman’s master cinematographer, Sven Nykvist, then encouraged or permitted Nykvist to shoot the film in plummy colors that visually contradict the story’s lithe line. Over and over Rafelson repeats the device of having a character walk from the background into an immense close-up, which not only becomes a tedious movement but nullifies the effect of close-ups. Over and over, like Kazan at his worst, he pushes the camera into the middle of physical violence only to lessen immediacy.

For the sexual heat that ought to bake the film, Rafelson substitutes explicitness. Instead of sexual looks and sniffings, Rafelson *shows*. He shows us Nicholson’s hand groping Lange’s groin, he shows Nicholson performing cunnilingus. (First time I’ve seen it outside porno since *I Am Curious, Yellow* [1967].) When Rafelson decides to be sexually symbolic, he’s equally deft. After the first time that Lange has made love with Nicholson, she prepares for bed, later that night, with her husband; the unaware husband plays “La donna è mobile,” from Verdi’s opera *Rigoletto* (1851), on the phonograph. (“Woman is fickle,” in case you missed it.) Then he follows it with the seduction duet from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (1787). When Lange comes down to the kitchen for something, where Nicholson is sitting and listening, she carries a cat in her arms. The cat/pubis connection wasn’t new when Erich von Stroheim used it in *Queen Kelly* (1928). Throughout, Rafelson’s work is all grabs, no style, and most of the grabs are at pictures he remembers and at exploitations now permissible.

Cain's story, if you've forgotten, is about a Depression drifter who is hired as a mechanic by the Greek owner of a garage-cum-diner in California. The Greek has a wife younger than himself and not Greek. (In the novel she has a lot of ethnic loathing for her husband, which at least helps to characterize and motivate her.) Cain wasn't concerned to show the hell into which two lovers plunge themselves by murdering the woman's husband, which was what Zola had done in *Thérèse Raquin* (1867); he wanted to dramatize the immorality of egotism, the fact that there is no reliable bar between gratification-as-ethics and murder. Rafelson and Mamet reduce the lovers to objects of our smirking recognition ("Oho, so that's the setup!"), abetted by the trite portrayal of the husband—John Colicos—as that same old wine-bibbing, life-loving European innocent strayed in from *They Knew What They Wanted* (film, 1940). All the people involved here, laboring diligently together, have turned out an empty and odious film.

***The Boat Is Full*, Markus Imhoof, 1981** (*The New Republic*, 28 October 1981)

Markus Imhoof is a forty-year-old Swiss director who is angry at Swiss mythology—in particular, the myth that Switzerland was a welcoming haven for refugees during the Hitler years. *The Boat Is Full* (1981), Imhoof's third feature, which he wrote himself and which is his first to be released in the United States, deals with a small group of refugees who flee a German train in 1942 and cross the Swiss border. They encounter the paradoxes of Swiss law, as well as the xenophobia and anti-Semitism of the Swiss—along, however, with enough sympathy to make the picture more ironic and therefore more terrible than 100% animosity would have been. Swiss law changed during the Hitler era and became more stringent during the war. In 1942 a deserting German soldier was safe in Switzerland: he would be interned. But a non-political refugee was sent back to Germany, which meant, if he was Jewish, death.

This film's title comes from a statement by a Swiss official in 1942 calling his country an "overcrowded little lifeboat." At that time Switzerland had approximately 8,300 refugees. Imhoof's group includes a very old Viennese Jew and his little granddaughter; a young German-Jewish woman, trying to join her husband already in Switzerland; her younger brother; a small abandoned French boy; and a deserting German soldier. At the end, after a series of stratagems that fail, only the soldier and the French boy are allowed to remain; the others are returned, to an unambiguous fate.

Curt Bois, born in 1901 in Berlin, the needle-nosed comedian who was a Max Reinhardt actor before Hitler, who had a busy life in Hollywood during his exile (he was the pickpocket in *Casablanca* [1942], for instance), and who returned to

Berlin in the 1950s, plays the eighty-year-old grandfather, and uses his age without sentimentality. I don't understand why the script never gave him a line about the wife from whom he is separated at the moment of flight—we see her about to be tossed into the boiler of a locomotive by the German soldiers who caught her in the coal tender—but what Bois is given to do, he treats with dignity and, for his granddaughter's sake, with hope as long as his strength lasts.

The young Jewish woman is played by Tina Engel, a member of what is currently the most celebrated theater in Europe, the Schaubühne of Berlin. (Bruno Ganz and Edith Clever of *The Marquise of O ...* [1976] were members of that company: Clever still works with them.) Engel has immediate authenticity: a conviction for us that talent and imagination have explored a character, composed it, and are presenting it whole; the woman she plays has a tiger's strength wrapped in wariness. Renate Steiger, a member of a Stuttgart theater, plays the wife of a restaurant owner in a village, who—almost reluctantly—warms to the refugees. Steiger is a solid woman who uses her physicality well, as Bois does his age. Michael Gempart, a Swiss actor, plays the least sympathetic part, the Swiss policeman responsible for the refugees' detection and return, and he does a nice job of conveying the quasi-pleasure in this policeman's need to do his duty. Imhoof deals comprehendingly with his actors and, if we allow for the fact that most of the film takes place in close quarters, handles the movement with fair fluency.

But why? If any of us have illusions about unquestioning Swiss benevolence, this film will shatter them. But is that enough to make us go through the heartache of Hitler refugees once again? I couldn't think so. I don't want to forget the Hitler facts, I don't want those too young to remember them to be ignorant of them, and heaven knows I'm not saying that pictures dealing with any of those facts should no longer be made; but since few of us have not been well harrowed by the facts, we must—in a sort of self-defense, if you like—ask ourselves whether we need to go through another instance of it. The instance has to do something more than (merely?) harrow us again. I had to scrounge for a reason in myself to justify the existence of *The Boat Is Full*, and the only one I could come up with is baldly utilitarian: maybe the film will do some good. The world is still full of boat people, whether or not literally in boats. Maybe Imhoof's film will help, in some small way, to sensitize us to them.

I don't really believe it. But it's the best rationale I could come up with.

***The Night of the Shooting Stars*, Paolo & Vittorio Taviani, 1982** (*The New Republic*, 7 March 1983)

The Taviani brothers, Paolo and Vittorio, are becoming jointly the Robert Altman of Italy. The three Taviani films that I've seen have strained to be stylish in

three different styles, and two of them, including the latest, strained so hard that they slid from failure into offensiveness. The best of the three was *Padre Padrone* (1977), made from the autobiography of a Sardinian who was illiterate until he was twenty, then fought his way to education and authorship. It was a good film that might have been better except for the nagging of its directors who kept trying to synthesize brutal naturalism with chic aestheticism—and only to draw attention to their prowess. Then came *Il Prato* (*The Meadow*, 1979), a picture of such indescribable tedium that I didn't try to describe it in these pages. This time the Taviani brothers went after contemporary *angst*, and this time the style was time-lag Antonioni. I kept pleading with the film to get just a bit worse so that I could laugh instead of yawn and wriggle.

Now comes still another style, the false naïve. *The Night of the Shooting Stars* (1982) wants to be a quaint epic told in peasant “diction” with implications of tremendous themes. What we get is quaintly hokum, transparently cagey. It's the story of a group of Tuscan townsfolk in 1944 who leave their town to escape vindictive murder by the retreating Germans and who try to find refuge with the advancing Americans. The mass epic is recounted by a woman who was six years old when she was in the group. This point of view is repeatedly traduced in the film because we see much that the child could not have witnessed and would not have understood if she had witnessed it. Thus the simplistic tone of the soundtrack narration is continually falsified, and the peasant-ballad intent becomes patently manipulative.

As the film begins, we hear the woman addressing someone she loves. Because it's in a bedroom and her terms of endearment are ambiguous, we are left to infer that she is with a lover—another falsehood. But we see neither her nor the other person—we look out the bedroom window at a sky of stars, a picture composed and colored like a mural in a cheap Neapolitan restaurant. Because we know that the Fratelli Taviani are experienced filmmakers, we know that this image is conscious slumming, and our response is soon certified by what happens when we move into the past. The innocence of a child's eyes, especially when looking at horrors, quickly degenerates into the craftiness of sophisticates.

With a group at the story's center, we of course get a cross section: heroes and cowards, sages and fools, common folk and eccentrics: a pregnant young bride, a classics-quoting scholar, a humble Sicilian maid who dreams of escaping to America. They all seem more familiar to us through films than through life, and for that reason we have a pretty good idea, fairly early, of what's going to happen to most of them. Soon the picture kept reminding me of wartime in an unintended way. During the war, posters were pasted in American bus and train stations and along highways, asking: Is This Trip Necessary? During *The Night of the Shooting Stars* I kept asking: Is This Film Necessary? After Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946), De

Sica's *Two Women* (1960), Salce's *The Fascist* (1961), Comencini's *Everybody Go Home!* (1960)—to name only a few—an Italian film on this subject at this late date takes on obligations of increment and illumination. *The Night of the Shooting Stars*, quintessentially, is not much more than rehash purportedly justified by its style.

Two sequences typify the film's veneered banality. The bishop in the town's cathedral wants to give communion but has no wafers. He takes an ordinary loaf of bread—and the minute he picks it up, we see the whole scene to come: he crumbles it into the salver, consecrates it, ministers to the communicants, then says it was the most sacred communion in which he has ever officiated. For obviousness—of dilemma, solution, conclusion, and execution—that sequence would be hard to surpass. Then, near the end, there's a bedroom scene between an old man and an old woman who are forced by circumstances to pose as man and wife in order to share the room. And, if that weren't cutesy enough, the Taviani boys make them a couple who have long been in love, have been separated by cruel fate, and who now go through a geriatric (though unconsecrated) wedding night.

One sequence—for me, only this one—cuts past fabrication into truth. All through the film, Italian Fascist militiamen have been killing people, presumably people who they think are partisans. Prominent among the Fascists are an officer and his fifteen-year-old son. Ultimately the two are captured. The father pleads for his son's life, but the boy, who has been boyishly cold-blooded throughout, is shot. The father goes insane, retaining just enough control to put his rifle in his mouth and pull the trigger. The counterpoint of contradictions beneath the surface here underscores the surface quality of most of the picture.

Then, after three or four false endings—another Taviani hallmark—the camera pulls back through that initial bedroom window into the present, while the woman continues to narrate. At last we see her, the six-year-old now a woman, and we see that the person to whom she has been telling this whole story—of murder and revenge, bombings and blood—is her child. Her sleeping child! Well, at least the kid didn't hear any of the horrors (most of which the six-year-old couldn't have seen).

So the falsity of the film's naïveté is at least doubled. Far from being overwhelmed, I was left merely wondering where, stylistically, the Taviani brothers would strike next? Symbolism? Expressionism? Cubism? Tune in next year or so.

***Breathless*, Jim McBride, 1983** (*The New Republic*,
13 June 1983)

Breathless has, in a sense, come home. The new American version reminds us of how much the original owed to America. Godard's now-celebrated 1960 film was

a young postwar European's reaction to postwar Europe, but it used American culture as symbol of freedom and source of vocabulary. Godard dedicated his film to Monogram Pictures, a Hollywood studio of the 1930s and 1940s that produced low-budget crime flicks. His heroine was an American who sold *The New York Herald Tribune* in Paris. The most prominently quoted author was Faulkner. The hero's idol was Humphrey Bogart. The film's structure (idea by Truffaut, script by Godard, technical counsel by Chabrol) was an idiosyncratic version of an American chase thriller. (The French title, *À bout de souffle*, translates more accurately as *Out of Breath*.)

Anarchies age quickly in the world of art. In the years immediately following its appearance, *Breathless* fractured acceptances about editing, composition, plotting, "sympathy." It would be false to say that its influence has disappeared: it has simply been absorbed into new orthodoxy. By 1974, which in France was much more post-1968 than postwar, Bertrand Blier's *Going Places* mocked *Breathless*, mocked its insistence on retaining a normative character (the girl) to show what a good life might be, and began its mockery with its very first sequence. The publicity about *Breathless* had boasted that Godard was so revolutionary that he pushed his cinematographer around in a supermarket shopping cart for tracking shots in serious moments; *Going Places* opened with one of the two leading young men pushing a cart with the other fellow in it as they tried to catch a woman and pinch her rear.

Well, that anarchy aged, too. Now *Breathless* has been remade in the country that was one of its spiritual parents; and now it restores the normative character at the same time that it seeks a 1980s American equivalent for the unrest in the Godard film that was bred out of 1940s America by 1950s France. The new *Breathless* (1983) was directed by Jim McBride; the script, derived from the French original, is by McBride and L. M. Kit Carson. They have both been well-regarded "independent" film figures since 1967, when McBride directed the memorable *David Holzman's Diary*, which Carson wrote and in which he played the lead. At last they have entered the big-budget world and, I'm glad to say, with very considerable success.

Is their *Breathless* as good as Godard's? Of course not. How could it be? Godard's film marked the appearance of one of the strongest original forces in the history of film; how could a film derived from it possibly be equally original? But that's a long way from saying that the derived film has no value. It has plenty; and just because it's as good as it is, some comparisons with Godard's film help to establish its individuality and its worth.

Stylistically, McBride makes the distinction quite easy. Except for a lot of Godardian exteriors—wide long-shots of walls covered with posters or murals past which characters move as across a stage—the new *Breathless* has virtually no

stylistic resemblance to the old, no jump cuts, much smooth and adroit tracking, many close-ups, lush color. Godard's style was both new and apt; McBride's style is not new but is apt. Godard's black-and-white style reflected the nervous sparseness of a shaken France and of French film emerging from Vichy "official" film style. McBride's style is an equally fitting reflection of place and time: his film sops up stylistically the gas-ripened richness of consumption-crazy America.

McBride's independence continues with the hero's character. Godard's Michel was the non-intellectual scion of Sartre and Camus. The American hero, Jesse, is, figuratively, a rock singer without a voice. His kinetic patterns look as if he were wearing an invisible Walkman set, listening to the Jerry Lee Lewis whom he adores. His ideal in behavior is to be free-spending, casual, to suggest the illicit in a manner that expects acceptance, to dismiss panting women cavalierly, to be in love fiercely and imperiously when he chooses. (I don't suggest that this is the behavior of Lewis or other singers: this is what Jesse has distilled from their public manner.) Godard's Michel has not much image of himself except in his attempts to mimic Bogart; Jesse sees himself the whole time, as in a portable mirror.

All this analysis could end right here if the role were not fulfilled. Richard Gere is, in two ways, sensational. He creates a Jesse who lives by and for sensation, like an infant with strength and gonads; and—second meaning—his effect is sensational. Gere fills every crevice of Jesse's being with energy and solipsist appetite. He is a well-established star by now, but here he returns to a manner he used early in his film career. In some of his films, like *Yanks* (1979), *American Gigolo* (1980), and *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), his powers were coated with a veneer of Mr. Nice Guy. *Breathless* gives us the Gere who was seen, relatively briefly, with knife and strobe light in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977).

Sex, italicized by frontal nudity, is basic to what he does here, but it's not all. Gere charges the screen with frustration and with simplistic dreams of perfection. For Godard's hero, the dream was virtually single—the Bogart icon. For Jesse, it's double; and Gere makes both parts equally affecting. There's the Jerry Lee Lewis itch and drive; and there's a (literal) comic-book idealism. For Jesse, the paragon is the Silver Surfer, a "super" character from outer space who tries to save the earth by bringing it the message of love. The florid dialogue that Gere reads aloud is clearly his gospel; and his rationale, apparently, is that since the world doesn't hear the right message, he's going to have a good time at the stupid world's expense.

The girl on whom he is fixated, in what he calls love, is a French architecture student at UCLA. (Thus McBride and Carson use a foreign girl, as Godard did.) The picture opens in Las Vegas, where he met the girl, then moves to Los Angeles so that he can see the girl again. She is played by a nineteen-year-old newcomer named Valérie Kaprisky, who is so good, so right, that she helps complete Gere's job for him. It's entirely credible that his Jesse would desperately desire this lithely

attractive, cool but inflammable student whose intellect irritates him to attack it. His attraction for her is, obviously, his difference from her and from everyone she knows: his directness, his animality, his glandular sincerity, and her near-unwilling response to all these things. My one moment of doubt about her behavior was when she gets in his car, to flee to Mexico, after she knows he has committed a murder and after she has seen her picture in the paper because of her connection with him. It *could* happen, of course, but at that moment I had to go along with the film.

There are some other questionable points. After Jesse shoots the highway patrolman near the start, the man (inexplicably, in film terms) doesn't die at once; and Jesse puts his folded jacket under the cop's head. Later, he breaks into the girl's UCLA exam room for a scene that belongs in a screwball comedy, not here. Later, she tells him she may be pregnant; why the "maybe" as against Godard's flat statement? Later, Jesse takes a lot of punishment in a fight in an automobile graveyard, including a choking with an iron bar, and walks away unhurt and unfazed. Neatest touch of all: he and the girl make love in the back of a movie theater that is showing *Gun Crazy* (1950), Joseph H. Lewis's much-praised *film noir* about a criminal pair who, like them, plan to flee from California to Mexico.

Nonetheless, the picture is a pleasant surprise. In advance the project was treated by many as a joke, one more doomed American attempt to replicate a notable foreign film. But McBride and Carson saw the fundamental need: to root their version in its own cultural soil, rather than try to transplant Godard's twenty-two-year-old film more or less intact. For instance, instead of attempting to reproduce Godard's wonderful sequence in the girl's tiny hotel bedroom, McBride and Carson transpose it to the swimming pool of her apartment house, thus exploiting Los Angeles space and luxury instead of faking Parisian cramp. This change epitomizes their film's entire transposition. McBride and Carson had to create a hero who is not an implicit symbol of revolt against the social-political order, a hero who just blindly wants more out of what the society is already providing, a hero with appeal for an audience whose only idea of revolt is to overthrow any obstacles between it and more pleasure. With Gere's electrifying help, McBride and Carson have succeeded.

***Pauline at the Beach*, Eric Rohmer, 1983** (*The New Republic*, 5 September 1983)

Under the credits is a lovely shot of a wooden gate across a short driveway leading to a cottage in the sun. After the credits, a small car drives in from the lower right-hand corner of the screen and pauses at the gate. At the end of the film, the car comes back down that driveway, the gate is closed again, and after a moment's

pause for conversation between the occupants, the car drives out the same corner of the screen, leaving us with the opening shot.

Symmetry is a faith with Eric Rohmer. In his *Six Moral Tales* (1963–72) the symmetry wasn't always as patent as in his latest film, but it was always there, even if ironic, as in *My Night at Maud's* (1969). Symmetry is Rohmer's attempt to reify spiritual design; the start and finish described above are as explicit as he has ever been. This explicitness makes the symmetry more amusing than in Rohmer's past work, but it is also ... explicit.

The new film, *Pauline at the Beach* (1983), is the third in his new series *Comedies and Proverbs*. (The proverb in this case is from Chrétien de Troyes: "He who talks too much digs his own grave," but it's only loosely applicable to the story.) *Pauline* is an immense improvement over the first two in this series, *The Aviator's Wife* (1981) and *The Perfect Marriage* (1982). *Pauline* doesn't have the depth of the best of the *Moral Tales*, but it's deeper than *The Perfect Marriage*, thank cinema heaven, and it's not the New Wave reheated, as was *The Aviator's Wife*. It's recognizable Rohmer. It has his calm in the midst of chaos, his ability to make a film purr along almost as if it had a sagacity of its own *vis-à-vis* the bumbblings and frenzies of the human beings within it.

Essential to the improvement, though not solely responsible for it, is the return of Nestor Almendros to Rohmer's side. Rohmer used a team of three very good cinematographers in his last two films, but the very first moment of *Pauline at the Beach* makes clear how important Almendros is to Rohmer's quality. Rohmer likes to put a shot before us and *look* at it, wants to drain it of all available savor and significance before a cut—even within the same scene. I'd bet that Almendros advises, besides doing his own work: at least he seems to give Rohmer added confidence in his own film vision.

Almendros lights and composes in a manner that puts emphasis where it belongs but also makes the smallest, farthest detail contribute. Early in *Pauline at the Beach*, for example, young woman named Marion, played by Arielle Dombasle, is sitting with her fifteen-year-old cousin Pauline, played by Amanda Langlet, at a table in the small garden next to the cottage. They converse about the matters that will eventually open up into the film's plot, but they merely converse; and the camera holds. I felt that I was there with them, listening, feeling the sun, hearing the sound of their voices as much as the words, smelling their different presences as well as the flowers. If I had been sitting there, in fact, I wouldn't have wanted a "cut": and I didn't want one in my theater seat. Just before the split second when consciousness of film intruded, Rohmer cut to Pauline alone. Until then (and after) he and Almendros followed the André Bazin principle of interfering as little as possible with the observable universe,

of letting surfaces convey interiors. Rohmer and Almendros collaborate, invisibly and visibly.

This hardly means that one can make good films by digging a camera tripod into the ground or nailing it to the floor. First comes conviction about why you are bothering to make films at all; then comes conviction about the material, about the potential cinematic evidence in that material, about your view of the evidence. One can work that equation backward or forward in the best moments of Rohmer, like the last scene of his 1972 film *Chloe in the Afternoon*. (I except *The Marquise of O ...* [1976] from comparison. Kleist puts that film in a different lode.) But this equation shows some fissures in the case of *Pauline at the Beach*—in Rohmer's judgment of his material, not the other factors.

As usual, Rohmer takes seemingly simple actions and lets them roll onward, intending to show that there is no such thing as a simple action. Actions have consequences. Marion is a successful Parisian fashion designer, in the process of being divorced. She is spending a few weeks at a cottage near a beach and has invited her young cousin Pauline to stay with her. On the beach they meet Pierre, who was in love with Marion before she married and who now persuades himself that he is still in love with her. Through Pierre, they meet an acquaintance of his named Henri, an ethnologist on vacation from his work in the Pacific. And on the beach they also meet a teenaged boy, Sylvain, who takes to Pauline and vice versa.

With these people, plus a young woman who peddles candies on the beach, Rohmer's script weaves webs. The characters almost seem to take their places at the start like acrobats, then, at a signal, begin combinations and somersaults. Sex and love are the principal themes, with the former predominating. Bathing suits and summery languor are essential to the film's texture. Nothing is substantively altered for any character by these experiences: the passage through the story results only in particularized symmetry for each. At the end, when Marion and Pauline leave in the car, they pause for a moment to "settle" a point. A few days earlier, the candy girl had been seen, naked, through the window of Henri's bedroom. The male in the room with her was not seen (although the audience knows who it was). For their own inner symmetries, Marion decides to believe it was Sylvain, Pauline decides to believe it was Henri. Having made their compact, the two cousins go back to Paris. Marion's choice assuages damaged pride; Pauline's choice, as the title tells us, is more important. Still, it's the design as such that they are finishing neatly.

Rohmer has been lucky with his actors. I use that term because, like the comparable though greater Robert Bresson before him, Rohmer casts less for demonstrated acting talent than for personal quality, and sometimes, like Bresson, he picks lemons: e.g., some of the people in *The Aviator's Wife*. Here the six principals have selves. The gorgeous Dombasle ("Too perfect," complains Henri) has the surprising insecurity of some beautiful women. Langlet has sweet, snub-nosed,

precocious dignity. Pascal Gregory, the pedantic Pierre; Féodor Atkine, the somewhat *louche* Henri; Simon de la Brosse, the self-assured boy; and Rosette Quéré, the nonchalant candy girl—all are individually good, and they orchestrate well.

Once again the humane Rohmer shows a strange streak of male cruelty. He showed it in *Chloe in the Afternoon*: Chloe, an exceptionally vulnerable young woman, is humiliated so that the hero's marital devotion can be tested and proved. In *Pauline at the Beach*, though the film is focused on women and their trials, the peddler is made a blatant slut for male use. Her treatment has some of the class distinction of old comedies—the working-class girl who is used, and expects to be used, by men.

But the ultimate trouble, and there is one, with this diverting film is that it is merely diverting, and Rohmer doesn't seem to know it. Too little is at stake for any character at any point. The characterizations and the discourse about love are at the level of, say, Ferenc Molnár's *Olympia* (1928). It takes considerable craft and ingenuity to be a Molnár, but there's no evidence Rohmer thought of *Olympia* as more than an entertainment. Here there's considerable evidence, beginning with the epigraph and continuing with the film's texture, that he believes his script has spiritual reverberations to match the best *Moral Tales*. For me, there are more plot complications than depth in *Pauline at the Beach*. Symmetry rules here by implication, and it isn't won.

It's cheering to see Rohmer making a film so well again, and making it with Almendros; but the defect in the "equation" cited above is the aerated geometry of this material. It's as if a fine chamber orchestra, capable of the best music, were playing a merely pleasant, bright-cum-poignant tune.

***Biquefarre*, Georges Rouquier, 1983** (*The New Republic*, 23 April 1984)

Farrebique (1946) is a little-known film with a large reputation that it deserves. In the mid-1940s Georges Rouquier, at the time in his mid-thirties and already established as a maker of documentaries, spent a year with a farm family in southern France, then made a film about the lives of that family, their friends, and others. The name of the farm is the title of the film. (The full title, translated, is *Farrebique, or The Four Seasons*.) It's not a true documentary, nor did Rouquier ever claim it is: many of the scenes were written by Rouquier from material that he had observed or heard, and he then persuaded the actual participants to re-enact them for his camera. He even got a young couple to re-enact the moment of the marriage proposal. Rouquier's method was not new: Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) was one antecedent. With Rouquier, at least as much as with Flaherty, the

result was a lovely work of a curious double quality. It had authenticity of place and persons, and it had sufficiently smooth performances to give us both the truth of the occurrence and the participants' regard for that truth by being willing to re-enact it.

Not often shown in American theaters, *Farrebique* has nonetheless had a continuing presence through university and film-club showings. Through the years Rouquier has worked steadily at other documentaries, mostly for French television, and has directed a few fiction features, but he had not been able to do what increasingly he wished to do: make a sequel to *Farrebique*. At last three American academics, admirers of the film, got a grant for Rouquier from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The rest of the money followed, and the sequel was—to the good fortune of us all—accomplished. The result is well up to its predecessor in feeling (Rouquier understands farmers' *hands*) and is of course technically more accomplished—for instance, it was shot in good color.

Biquefarre (1983) is not just a twist on the original title: it's the name of an adjoining farm. The basic theme in *Farrebique* was the coming of a new age, symbolized by electrification, to a tradition-bound community. The second film, too, deals basically with change. The farming community is now "industrialized"—the milking is done by machine, the availability of giant harvesters dominates work schedules—and the new change derives from that fact. Small farming has become more and more difficult economically. The action of *Biquefarre* centers on the struggle to keep *Farrebique* as it was and to add *Biquefarre* to it.

There's no point in saying that it doesn't matter whether or not you've seen the first film in order to enjoy *Biquefarre*: it does matter. But it's not essential. Some clips from the first film have been spliced into the second to help establish continuities; thus we can see some of those who have died and some of the survivors when younger. The delay in making the sequel actually turns out to be an ill wind that blew some good. The greater time lapse permitted greater change in circumstances and lives between the two films. And so we have a brace of films that fix a portion of life in our century, one sort of past on the way to becoming the future.

À Nos Amours, Maurice Pialat, 1983 (*The New Republic*, 19 November 1984)

"Of all the directors with whom I have worked, Maurice Pialat is undoubtedly the one who most respects the reality of things." So wrote Nestor Almendros in his recent book *A Man With a Camera* (1984), thus making the reader grateful that Almendros photographs more illuminatingly than he writes. If the statement were true, where would it leave Rohmer and Truffaut, some of whose best films—most

“real” films—were shot by Almendros? The two previous Pialat films I’ve seen, neither made with Almendros, did little to substantiate whatever muzzy idea may be lurking in the quotation. The latest Pialat, however, photographed by Jacques Loiseleux, provides more than a hint of what Almendros was fumbling at.

À Nos Amours (1983), written by Pialat and Arlette Langmann, begins discouragingly. An attractive fifteen-year-old girl, Sandrine Bonnaire, is rehearsing a play at a summer camp in southern France. (The play isn’t identified, presumably on the assumption that a French audience will recognize it. Its title has significance for the film—*No Trifling with Love* [1834], by Musset.) She steals away from camp to meet her boyfriend in a nearby tent, and our interest begins to steal away from the film. Are we in for one more idyll of adolescent awakening?

Matters soon take a different turn. She declines sex with her boyfriend, whom she apparently likes, and shortly after she gives herself to an American boy whom she has just met and whom she never meets again after her initiation. This difference, from the hushed-purity initiation in most tales of adolescent bloom, makes us want to follow her back to Paris to learn more.

What we see can’t be called explanation in a clinical sense; it’s more a dramatization of the forces that are hassling her. Her father, a Polish-born furrier, is a man who does his best to be wise and patient, while he runs his business at one end of their large apartment. Her mother is devoted but is addicted to hysteria. Her brother, a beginning playwright of some talent, is pudgy and effeminate except when he is forced to take on the *paterfamilias* role (later) and overdoes it. The family seems to expect fierce quarrels as part of the daily diet, quarrels that usually center on the daughter’s behavior. At last the father, played by the bearded Pialat himself, says he can’t take any more and moves out. The remaining three continue to have their daily quarrel or two, about the daughter still.

Her behavior, which is the source of the quarrels, is a kind of gonadic mimesis of the usual fragrant story of first loves. Bonnaire discovers not only that she likes sex but that she feels safest when she is having sex. She proceeds to have quite a lot of it, with minimal discrimination about partners. The quarrels continue at home. Without overt analysis, we can see that she has learned to distrust affection; but she feels she can rely on pleasure. Rather arbitrarily she marries one of the boys, and when there is a family feast, the father suddenly reappears, intent on selling the apartment. The worst quarrel follows. Not long after her marriage, she goes off to America with another man. Her father accompanies her on the bus to the airport, and from their long, warm conversation, we are to infer not only their love for each other persisting under the angers but his sense of responsibility and his heartache for her future.

If Pialat’s film were as lucid as this sketch, it would be stronger. It would still be somewhat assumptive, one more entry in the Parents Are to Blame for

Everything Department. But it would have a more realized view of one aspect of youthful behavior. As is, the audience is expected to credit the film with greater wisdom and insight than it earns. This is signally true of Pialat's own performance. Aren't a beard and some sighs and pauses enough to convey depth? Answer: no.

As the estrous daughter, Bonnaire is sufficiency appealing and humorous to keep her from being pathological. Still, though we believe her actions, she is too shallow an actress to convince us that the family forces are forcing her to do them. Dominique Besnehard, the brother, gives a performance that is skillfully ineffectual. But the most memorable acting is done by the mother, Evelyne Ker, who zooms to near-lunacy in her anger and subsides to conventional behavior with tacit confidence in her family's understanding. We're told that some of the quarrel scenes were improvised, in which case Pialat is to be congratulated for his license and Ker for her use of it. Yet the quarrels are so strong that they overbalance the rest of the film, which is supposed to be about the effect of the quarrels on the daughter. Perhaps those quarrels are samples of the respect for reality that Almen-dros praises in Pialat; perhaps that kind of reality intoxicates the director a bit.

***El Sur*, Victor Erice, 1983** (*The New Republic*, 15 February 1988)

Reviewing *El Sur* is a peculiar and painful business. This Spanish film is excellently made in every particular. The director is Victor Erice, whose only previous feature was *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973). I missed it, but I've read enough about it in journals and books to make me writhe at my omission and to long for his next. Now *El Sur* (*The South*), done in 1983, arrives at last, and now I'm even unhappier that I missed Erice's first film. (I've missed half of his ten-year output!) From the first moment and without waver throughout, *El Sur* is the work of an unusually accomplished, thoughtful artist. Yet I left the film feeling that, lovely as it is, it is oddly unfulfilled.

It's a puzzlement, unhappily clarified by something I read later. In *The International Film Guide*, 1984, José Luis Garner writes that we are not seeing the whole film because the whole film was not made. Garner calls *El Sur*, rightly, "a story marked by a very pure, almost crystallized emotion." Then he says:

The film, though, does not respond to what the director wanted as only half the script has been shot: to reduce the economic risk, the producer called off the shooting as soon as he considered there was sufficient material. The editing has therefore been subject to the requirements of reconstructing, as much as possible, an incomplete story. An unusual situation that accentuates the singularity of this film, without doubt the best in Spain this year.

This, then, is not the same situation as with, say, Visconti's two films *The Leopard* (1963) and *Ludwig* (1972), which were cut before they were released. The missing material in *El Sur* was never made. But I underscore two points: Garner's high opinion is justified, and no kind of deceit can be imputed to anyone connected with the film's release, here or abroad—this is the film that Erice presented as *El Sur*.

Then is this film, constructed under duress, worth seeing? Yes, and again yes. I've cited Garner's report, first, because it exists, and second, because it helps to answer possible questions after the beautiful experience of *El Sur*. Here is what we see. In 1957 a doctor, his wife, and their fifteen-year-old daughter live in northern Spain, near a walled town where he works in a hospital. The daughter, Estrella, is the narrator of the story (from time to time we hear her subsequent, adult explanations along the way), and most of the film is seen from her point of view. We see her father as she remembers him through childhood until adolescence; we hear how she thinks of him subsequently; we sense the reciprocal love between her and this dark, reclusive man.

As an eight-year-old she learns about his practice of a kind of necromancy, his use of a small, hand-held pendulum for water-dowsing and for other pursuits anomalous in a doctor. She knows that he came from the south of Spain, that he left there before she was born and never returned. As a child she learns, too, that his departure from the south had something to do with the outcome of the Spanish Civil War. At the end, when she is fifteen, she is off—after a shocking climax—to visit the south for the first time in her life, to see her grandmother and to follow her one clue to her father's past. Always there has been a tacit bond between her and this shadowed man; at the end it persists.

Two elements are skimpy in the screenplay. First, the weight of matters that brings about the climax is too light. Second, we feel that political matters, related to the civil war and its aftermath, are only sketched, that they are meant to have more importance to the doctor and his past. Both these elements, I'd guess, are connected—or are meant to be.

But *El Sur* is, nonetheless, exquisite. For instance, the opening sequence: the screen beneath the title and credits is black. There is no sound. Then dawn touches a window, fills the window, opens up the room that we are in. We see Estrella asleep. Outside a dog begins to bark. Then we hear her mother calling her father. No reply. We hear running, we hear the mother calling the maid. The camera remains with the fifteen-year-old Estrella, who wakes, sits up, takes a box from her pillow, removes her father's pendulum, and plays with it as the hubbub continues outside. This opening, superbly photographed (as is the whole film) by José Luis Alcaine, establishes Estrella as the core of the story and establishes, too, that there is a link between her and her father that others do not know.

The film flashes back from that opening and ultimately returns to it. That sequence not only encloses the story, it establishes Erice's taste. In every aspect, the ascetic yet not dry selection of shots; the quick fades to black after most sequences that treat them as units of memory, beads on a string; the terseness with which he moves narrative and draws character—all these prove the taste of a director who is repelled by platitude but too gifted to replace platitude with eccentricity.

All of the cast create richness; the three principals give the film its center. The eight-year-old Estrella, Sonsoles Aranguren, makes her curiosity endearing. The fifteen-year-old Estrella, Iciar Bollain, has dignity and understanding. The scene in which her father takes her to lunch at the town's luxe hotel is like chamber music between the two. He is played by the Italian actor Omero Antonutti, familiar from the Taviani films *Padre Padrone* (1977) and *The Night of the Shooting Stars* (1982). Antonutti is compelling as the father, a man who is taciturn, not because he is unfeeling, but because he cannot bear to speak of what is within.

Erice wrote the following some years ago, "Sometimes I think that for those whose childhood contained an inherent vacuum, or those of us born immediately after a civil war like ours, the elders were often just that: a vacuum, an absence." *The Spirit of the Beehive*, I've read, deals with that theme: two small sisters involved symbolically in the war's aftermath. *El Sur* is obviously related in theme and perspective to the earlier film. It would be as silly to miss *El Sur* because of its compression as it would be to miss *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) because RKO fiddled with Welles's work. It's even sillier—criminally silly—of the film world to permit the talented Erice to make only two films in ten years (presuming he wanted to make more) and then to harry him about completing the second.

***The Cotton Club*, Francis Ford Coppola, 1984**

(*The New Republic*, 7 & 14 January 1985)

Once again, the *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) syndrome. That film, ostensibly about gangsters of the 1930s, was really about gangster pictures of that period. *The Cotton Club* (1984), ostensibly about the same gangsters, is also really about the same pictures, plus a heavy admixture of the nightclub sequences that often figured in those pictures. Its only modernity is that it tells the story of some blacks in a way that no picture of its historical period would have done; otherwise *The Cotton Club* is just one more homage to Hollywood.

The director, Francis Ford Coppola, knows well the films he is mocking/adoring, and he makes lots of sly references to them. The parties, the bombings, the machine-gunnings, the gals-gals-gals are all cozily familiar. (How warmly nostalgic it feels to see bootleggers kill one another.) With his editors, Barry Malkin

and Robert Q. Lovett, Coppola has studded his film with montages in high Slavko Vorkapich style: careers are advanced in collages; events are condensed by spinning newspapers that eventually fix their headlines before us; years themselves—1931, 1932, etc.—parade past. With his cinematographer, Stephen Goldblatt, Coppola has worked in portentous shadows and canted camera angles to reflect the German expressionist influence that Hollywood was gobbling up fifty years ago. In both these departments, however, Coppola has added his own touches. The editing within sequences is often so restless that it's dizzying. He intercuts dance numbers on the nightclub floor with dramatic action elsewhere (irony!), and he concludes by blending "reality" with "life" by putting dance into the final love scene at Grand Central Station. With the color that his forerunners didn't have at their disposal, Coppola frequently splashes in golden browns, and stays well away from realistic color all the time to make every moment look like history. He also uses a lot of tight shots and close-ups, possibly to suggest the psychological insights that were missing from the pictures of the 1930s.

The screenplay is by Coppola and by William Kennedy, the bard of Albany; they wrote the original story with the aid of Mario Puzo. I was convinced that they had all had a good time, as they remembered or re-saw old gangster flicks, as they remembered the allegations about George Raft's past and put touches of them in this hero's life; as they remembered Jean Harlow, the screen persona, and Texas Guinan, the nightclub owner, and added a few drops of each to the heroine; as they remembered the story of Al Capone getting slightly cross with a colleague, breaking a bottle, and grinding the broken end into his colleague's face. And they remembered, too, that among the many celebrated black entertainers who passed through the Cotton Club were teams like the Nicholas Brothers, and they apparently used that fact as a springboard for a conventional backstage fiction, this time about blacks.

The Cotton Club was a hot subject of discussion among us white New York high school and college kids, who of course never got anywhere near it. (I had a college friend who said he had been there once, but nobody believed him.) It was the most famous of the Harlem nightspots to which only white people were admitted, though all the entertainers were black. The film shows the Cotton Club as nationally renowned—Chaplin and Cagney and Swanson attend—and as a rendezvous for gangsters, chiefly Owney Madden, Dutch Schultz, and (later) Lucky Luciano. In and around the club, four main story strands weave: gangland rivalries; the sporadic love affair between a white jazz cornetist (Richard Gere), who works elsewhere of course, and a tootsie (Diane Lane) who is Schultz's property; the aberrations of the cornetist's criminal brother (Nicolas Cage); and the stormy love affair of a black tap dancer (Gregory Hines) and a black singer (Lonette McKee). With the Cotton Club as the hub of the wheel, these stories are meant to

circumscribe the dazzle and frenzy of the late 1920s, the thud of the Depression, the advent of a glimmer of social justice. (At the end of the film, black patrons are admitted to the Club.) These are elements of a possibly good film, but it wasn't made. Instead, Coppola and friends made a film about a film on those elements.

This focus-once-removed begins with the treatment of the characters. They are so candidly two-dimensional that we are clearly meant to recognize them as familiar movie figures and to accept them as such. Further, not one of them is given much more than a wisp of moral sense. This might be admirable if *The Cotton Club* were a deliberate exploration of immorality, like Elaine May's *Mikey and Nicky* (1975), but here we're supposed to overlook the characters' moral blankness just because they are characters in a movie. These people are meant to entrance us additionally because they are porters of reminders from bygone films, carrying with them the baggage of our filmgoing lives.

As the cornetist placed in Hollywood by gangland, Gere doesn't do his best—his best was in *Breathless* (1983)—but he has some flash. (And he is credited with his own cornet solos.) As the kept woman (remember that phrase?) who keeps on being kept till she gets her own nightclub, Lane is precocious: she is herself quite young but is credibly brassy and, in time, worn. James Remar, as Schultz, wears a fixed snarl throughout like a mask. (Schultz's death scene is one of the factual liberties taken here. He didn't die in the restaurant where he was gunned down. He lingered in a hospital bed for twenty-four hours, during which he was questioned by police and his raving answers were taken down by a police stenographer. The transcript was published and became the basis of William Burroughs' *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz* [1970].) The previous time I saw Bob Hoskins was as a cockney gangster in a British picture; as Owney Madden, he sounds right and is a small barrel of vim. Hines was in the Broadway musical *Sophisticated Ladies* (1981), done to the music of Duke Ellington, who himself makes an "appearance" here; that show was directed by Michael Smuin, the principal choreographer of this film. Hines is more engaging here than he was in that show, perhaps because, according to the credits, he did the "tap improvography." Those who remember Julian Beck as co-director of the Living Theater may care to know that he plays a wraithlike gunslinger here, effectively. (His co-director, Judith Malina, was effective in *Dog Day Afternoon* [1975]. Both of these good film performances increase one's respect for Beck and Malina, in a wry way.)

I rated *The Godfather*, both parts (1972, 1974), much lower than did numerous others, but certainly Coppola tried in those films to create a genuine film epic, monumentally serious, about organized crime in America. In *The Cotton Club* he has made a picture with much of the manner and matter of the very gangster films he once tried to supersede. The Cotton Club itself was an excellent locus for a film, a ready-made metaphor. But for whatever reasons (the press reported

production tussles), the promising fruitful idea became a hothouse forced plant. Coppola, seemingly tormented by an inability to fulfill his own ideas and talents, took refuge in unsubtle stylistics. The great American curse in the arts is that many people keep showing talent without producing fully realized works. Coppola, up to now anyway, is in that line.

***Another Country*, Marek Kaniewska, 1984**

(The New Republic, 9 July 1984)

Another Country (1984) is exceptionally well made in every aspect but its screenplay, and even there, the dialogue is pungent. But after ninety freighted minutes, we arrive only at an unsatisfying implication. Julian Mitchell wrote the screenplay from his London theater success (1981), which I've read, and the very dexterity of his adaptation puts a strain on the theme, a strain that in several ways the original play avoided. Mitchell's theme is the Burgess-Maclean-Philby phenomenon: the upper-class Englishmen, schoolboys in the early 1930s, who became agents for the U.S.S.R. and some of whom fled there. Near the start we see the aged protagonist, Bennett (based on Burgess), in Moscow in 1983, being interviewed by a female American journalist. The body of the film is more or less what Bennett recounts for her tape recorder. At the finish she asks him what he misses in his exile. He says there's only one thing, really: cricket.

Almost all the action takes place fifty years earlier at an old, exclusive public school. (Some of the exterior shooting was done at Oxford.) The school life is heavy with ancient codes and with homosexuality, that English public school homosexuality which is—or is said to be—only a temporary outlet for most of the boys rather than the true nature of their sexual dispositions. In fact, near the end, when Bennett tells a school chum that he doesn't think he will ever love a woman, the chum, who is familiar with the homosexual activity in the school, can hardly believe him.

This chum reads Marx and Lenin assiduously and considers himself a Communist. Never at any point does Bennett reveal the slightest influence on him of the chum's Marxist readings or arguments. Bennett is concerned chiefly with two matters: his idyllic love affair with another boy and his prospective elevation to an elite group in the school. Because of complications about the former, he learns that he will not get the latter. He is disconsolate. At the close he feels wretched, ruined. Because he won't get into that school elite, he believes that he won't have the upward diplomatic career he had fancied for himself. There is hardly a political syllable in what he says, just despair. Nonetheless we flash forward to the conclusion of his Moscow interview in 1983, which concludes the film.

Thus we are to believe that Bennett eventually became a Soviet agent and resident because his homosexuality blighted his social career at school and because, in his belief, this fact blighted his future in British diplomacy. The school story may, as far as I know, mirror Burgess's school life, but if so, that accuracy is not enough. Apparently most of the actual figures who became Soviet agents were indeed homosexual, and their sexuality played at least as much of a part in all aspects of their lives, I'm sure, as sexuality does for anyone. But to concentrate on that aspect, in an early stage, is to trivialize complex matters. One doesn't need to applaud Soviet espionage to infer that those English defectors were sorely troubled by the Depression, by guilt at their own social privileges, by Britain's dogged stolidity in high places; and that they were stirred by the seeming courage and nobility of the Soviet adventure.

The trivialization is less, though present, in the original play because there are no flashes forward to the aged Bennett in Moscow; and Mitchell also obviously relied on the knowledge of history that his British audience brought to the theater. The film quite clearly can't have the same reliance on its audience; more, by juxtaposing the schoolboy with the old man, the film widens the gap between the two, stretches the implication to skimpiness. The viewer has a right to wonder whether treason and defection are as simple as *Another Country* renders them. Ever since Lytton Strachey (at least), theories have been plentiful about the personal causes of public events; but this film is sweepingly reductive about a complicated subject.

However, as a piece of filmmaking, *Another Country* is wonderfully rich. From the very first shot—a glide along a tranquil stream toward a low, multi-arched, stone bridge—the cinematographer, Peter Biziou, evokes the double England, the land that is both treasured and loathed, treasured by those who venerate its beauty and loathed by those who view that veneration as an excuse for social torpor. (The Communist student says he hates cricket because it's such "a damned good game," which by its appeal supports class strata. The English England-loathers feel much the same about English beauties.) Biziou carries this aesthetic-social tension through the film. The director, Marek Kaniowska, born in England of Polish parents, makes his feature-film debut here after much TV experience and shows that he's a potentially important find. In composition, movement, pace, and sympathy, Kaniowska never falters. And he has cast the film perfectly—or as close to perfection as casting conditions would permit: apparently, he had to use a few actors who were literally too old for their roles because they were the ones who could do the job. But, since this lofty kind of English schoolboy makes a point of behaving beyond his years, is exceptionally articulate, and has already deliberately developed tastes and mannerisms to make himself a character, the performances of these young men as seventeen-year-olds don't seem quaint.

Bennett is played by Rupert Everett, who originated the role in the theater in 1981. Everett carries it off with such subscription to Bennett's attitudes, sulks, yearnings, and juvenile brilliancies that there is no slightest hint of assumed boyishness. Apropos of a fuss about ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps), Bennett says, "I'm not a soldier, I'm a schoolboy." Everett makes it ring true, despite the evidence of his face. About his face: it is somberly handsome, aquiline, just fierce enough so that it's not overly sensitive. Everett is an actor to watch, in two senses.

In this finely made film, one aspect is particularly fine—the editing. Kanievsky and his editor, Gerry Hambling, have sparked *Another Country* with interior vitality by the way they have woven and cut. After that first shot of the English stream, we flash to the beginning of the Moscow interview fifty years later, then back to the school; thus the perimeter of the story is deftly defined. This past-present interplay recurs and is always deft. Admittedly it's simple to do; much more adroit and imaginative is the editing within the school story itself. Kanievsky and Hambling know just where to look at every moment, therefore when to look away. They know, just a sliver of a second before we do, where we want our eyes to go—or where we didn't know we want them to go. This eliminates any touch of sag or hurry; more, it suggests intelligence in the film because of the intelligence of its makers. The irony in this is that the excellent editing only heightens our already high expectations, thus adds to our letdown. I wouldn't want to have missed this film; it just left me feeling that Part Two had been omitted.

***Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Hector Babenco, 1985**

(*The New Republic*, 2 September 1985)

Kiss of the Spider Woman (1985) is one of those lurid titles that are used as a kind of slumming, a tip that the work is so serious it can afford initial irony. Thus it's obliquely more portentous than a grim title. Edward Albee brought the trick off with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). But *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a Brazilian film adapted from a 1976 novel by Manuel Puig, doesn't come near earning its wryness.

At the start the camera travels slowly around a prison cell while we hear a man describe a glamorous woman in a luxurious setting. After moving past paste-ups of female film stars, past a crude dressing table, the camera lights on the face of a homosexual prisoner, Molina, as he winds a red scarf around his head and applies lipstick. He continues the story, which is of a film he has seen, and the camera continues: to show us his cellmate, Arregui, apparently not homosexual and not much interested in the story. Molina's narrative is illuminated by flashes of the

black-and-white film itself, which is about the adventures of a Parisian *chanteuse* under the German occupation and which eventually shows her realization of error in siding with the Resistance, her eventual embrace of her German lover.

But that's revealed later. Here, near the beginning, we come back from the black-and-white film into the underwater colors of the cell. Molina is completely naïve about the film's political contents. We have seen, for instance, the Germans arrest some Jews in yarmulkes and have heard Molina describe the prisoners as Turks. Arregui identifies them properly from the other man's description, but Molina doesn't care: he's interested only in the clothes and affairs of the heroine.

We move into the lives of these two cellmates. The country, Latin American, is not named, but the picture was shot in São Paulo and the signs that we see are in Portuguese. (The dialogue is in English.) Molina is in jail on sexual counts. Arregui is a political prisoner, badly bruised from his interrogation; in fact, since he confessed nothing, he doesn't know why the interrogation has ceased. We soon find out. He has been put in a cell with Molina because, as we learn in the warden's office, the homosexual has been promised parole if he wins Arregui's confidence and gets some information.

Friendship develops between the two men, especially when, on different days, each is made ill by poisoned food and is helped by the other. Though Arregui is not gay, affection, too, develops between them after much bickering. Then Molina tells the impatient warden that Arregui might disclose secrets if he knew that Molina were about to be paroled and could help him outside. The warden agrees. After the two men's last night together, in which they make love, Arregui gives Molina a telephone number and a message. A few days after his release, Molina phones the number, with calamitous results.

The story—at least as adapted by Leonard Schrader—is invested with weighty themes that leak away. We soon know about Molina's espionage and why he's doing it. We are then asked to believe that Molina is converted from self-gratifying treachery to self-sacrificing idealism through his one sexual experience with Arregui: that he is now truly in love and will keep faith unto death. Then the clever Molina, on his way to a rendezvous with Arregui's political friends, spots the police on his tail yet keeps the appointment anyway, thus leading the police to their quarry. And what is Arregui's place in this drama? Given half the space both in the cell and the story, his only function is to be so impressed with Molina as a result of their one amorous night that he confides in the other man, which leads eventually to his further beating and to death. In dramatic terms he has nothing to *do*.

Insofar as the film has a point, it's a silly sentimental one. A night of love changes a frivolous gay into a selfless hero and convinces Arregui, supposedly a

knowledgeable, worldly man to begin with, that gays have potential nobility. This proposition seems offensive to everyone concerned, including the audience.

The director, Hector Babenco, made *Pixote* (1981) a few years ago, a heavy-handed, Buñuel-plus-heartbreak saga of a ten-year-old street criminal. Babenco's subtlety here is exemplified by a touch when the two men sink into the shadows to make love. The candle by the bed is extinguished, and the camera closes up on the wick that glows in the dark.

Sonia Braga, last seen to display more flesh than talent in *Gabriela* (1983), shows less flesh and even less ability in what are laughingly called three roles, all in flashback: the chanteuse in the narrated film, Arregui's sweetheart in a "real-life" flashback, and the Spider Woman. (I forgot to mention that Molina also briefly recounts part of another film, a fantasy about a Spider Woman.) In the last scene more symbolism is shoveled on when Arregui's sweetheart leads him from his deathbed in the prison hospital to the Spider Woman's island, and as they set out in a boat, the black-and-white of the interior film changes to color. This has everything but meaning.

Raul Julia plays Arregui with continence and gravity. William Hurt sees Molina as a chance to do a gay, and he grabs greedily for audience approbation of his daring. It is a performance several substrata below Richard Burton's in *Staircase* (1969) or Marcello Mastroianni's in *A Special Day* (1977). Obviously there is no one way to act a gay any more than a heterosexual, but Hurt goes for the mannerism rather than the character, even the character in love with mannerism. Add his tedious voice with its three-note range, and the result is poor—all the worse because of Hurt's usual suggestion of self-admiration.

***A Room with a View*, James Ivory, 1985** (*The New Republic*, 24 March 1986)

The director James Ivory, the producer Ismail Merchant, and the screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala have been collaborating since 1963. They have made over ten films, all of which were unmistakably serious and most of which were nagged by dullness; the hallmark of their work has been good intentions. In the last decade, along with other films, they have turned to famous novels, beginning with Henry James. *The Europeans* (1979) was sluggish in every way. *The Bostonians* (1984) was much better in nearly every way and had Vanessa Redgrave's sterling portrayal of Olive Chancellor. Now the trio present another adaptation, *A Room with a View* (1985). It's easily the best of their adaptations, but at the risk of sounding mean-spirited, I think it's the best because E. M. Forster's book is in all dimensions less demanding than James.

A Room with a View (1908) is, with reason, considered the weakest of the five major Forster works. It shows us English people in Florence and in Surrey, and among other matters, it shows them looking at Italy with English eyes, then at England with eyes quickened by Italy. It's the story of young Lucy Honeychurch, well bred and chaperoned in Florence by her aunt, Miss Bartlett, who nonetheless is kissed by young George Emerson in a Tuscan meadow; who bears this secret, with her aunt, through her return home and her engagement to Cecil Vyse. Then she re-meets George, who by coincidence (a coincidence that is like a bone in the book's throat) rents a house nearby with his father; is kissed again by George; breaks off her engagement to Cecil; and after the requisite inner turmoil, marries George. The shape of the story is so patently formal that, if it weren't for the exquisitely perceptive writing, the book would be only a broad satire of romantic novels (like one such novel that is written by a novelist *in* the book). And to ensure that the reader realizes that the author knows what he is doing, Forster gives each chapter a slightly mocking title—even if he only follows the numeral 4 with the words “Fourth Chapter.”

Clearly the filmmakers have chosen a book that in no way, except that it's a period piece, approaches James. It approaches someone else. One doesn't need to read Forster's 1924 essay on Jane Austen (“I am a Jane Austenite. ... She is my favourite author!”) to recognize that *A Room with a View* was written under her influence. The mode is social comedy. The style is built on engaging rhythms, ticked with tiny surprises. (Lucy's first kiss is interrupted by the sudden arrival of her aunt: “The silence of life had been broken by Miss Bartlett, who stood brown against the view.”) The book reads as if Forster, allowing for a century's passage, had set himself an Austen exercise with, I'd say, *Emma* (1815) in mind. But Forster's book quite lacks the quality much noted in Austen, the darkness below the politesse, the ruthlessness. “She is never for one moment soft in any way,” says the English literary critic and novelist Walter Allen. *A Room with a View* is often soft in many ways; and this, despite its charms, is what dates the book, while Austen remains timeless. It is this lesser dimension, smaller than Austen—and James—that makes Forster's book more accessible to these filmmakers.

Jhabvala retains as much as possible of the book, which means that she gives as much as possible to the camera without losing sight or sound of Forster. There was no need to transmute any of this novel into cinematic equivalents, as David Lean was forced to do with his 1984 film of Forster's incomparably more complex *A Passage to India* (1924). Jhabvala has quarried out her script neatly and, by including many of the chapter titles on prettily decorated title cards, has helped to “place” the film.

Tony Pierce-Roberts, whose previous work includes the dissimilar and inferior *Moonlighting* (1982) and *A Private Function* (1984), has photographed as if to

match the title cards in motion, but with no hint of the precious. Those superlative costume designers, Jenny Beavan and John Bright, who did *The Bostonians*, delight us again with the harmonies and easy richness of the clothes. A particular triumph is the dressing of Cecil, which touches caricature without losing reality.

Ivory and Merchant have cast the film as well as *The Bostonians* and with the same major flaw. Denholm Elliott is screen-filling as the elder Emerson, who has slightly absurd but quite moving concern for his son George's happiness. Maggie Smith, the Miss Bartlett, who is always dexterous, enters a new phase of her career as she begins to take on roles without sexual lives of their own. The local vicar is Simon Callow, quite jolly as the roast beef of Old England, clerical style. And the two young men, Julian Sands as the heated George, Daniel Day-Lewis as the Edwardian aesthete Cecil, could not be improved on. (I had just seen Day-Lewis, son of the poet, as a mod homosexual London crook, in a picture called *My Beautiful Laundrette* [1985].) But, as in *The Bostonians*, the leading female role is poorly cast.

Helena Bonham Carter is better as Lucy than she was in *Lady Jane* (1986) chiefly because the role is much better for her—less demanding in some aspects, more varied in others. As in the previous film, Bonham Carter has the initial advantage of the right quality, the (unavoidable term) class that the role needs. Most of the time she is passable, the exceptions being the big dramatic moments where, hand-wagging and all, she looks amateurish. But to be passable is not enough in a role that is pivotal in an elaborate gavotte. Bonham Carter is a remote presence, her remoteness underscored by her face. The trouble is not that she's not conventionally pretty. (Was the young Jane Fonda conventionally pretty?) Her round, undefined face with its inordinately heavy eyebrows is simply not a good actor's mask, as it used to be called. Her face is a barrier; we have to convince ourselves that she means what she says despite the way she looks—and sounds. Bonham Carter is like an undergraduate in a university production who seems rather good considering that her performance is only an intelligent diversion while she prepares herself for a career in another field.

Whatever Bonham Carter does achieve must be credited in some measure to Ivory, just as he must have contributed to the very good work of the others. Ivory makes the whole film move fluently enough; the lack of excitement must, in this instance, be charged as much to Forster as to him. Like Forster, he has opted for style rather than passion. To put it otherwise: we know it was an option with Forster; and Forster's choice fit Ivory's abilities.

All the more mystery, then, why he chose to use a lush Puccini aria under the beginning and end of the film—"O mio babbino caro" [Oh My Beloved Father], which in fact comes from an opera (*Gianni Schicchi*, 1918) that was written ten years after Forster's novel was published. It's Italian, yes, but so are three or four thousand other airs that might have better fitted the film's temper.

Possibly Ivory was trying to underline a conflict recurrent in the book, between decorum and passion, as evidenced in the demure Lucy's fierce playing of Beethoven or the murder that she finds herself witnessing in the Piazza Signoria. In that case, Jhabvala and Ivory have chosen an ironic ending, not Forster's, that puts Lucy's passion in some doubt. She and George are back in the Florentine pension where they met, sitting in the window overlooking the Arno—the room with a view that marriage now permits them to share. As he kisses her cheek and neck, she reads a letter from her brother over his shoulder. As he kisses her bosom, she continues to read. Is this a comment on the marital life ahead? If so, why? There's no ground for it in anything earlier.

***My Life as a Dog*, Lasse Hallström, 1985** (*The New Republic*, 25 May 1987)

A nice coincidence. In 1969 *Here's Your Life* (1966) opened in New York, the lovely first film by the Swedish director Jan Troell, which was the story of a boy's life from age fourteen to age eighteen. The boy was played by Eddie Axberg. Now there's a differently lovely Swedish film about a boy, a twelve-year-old this time, called *My Life as a Dog* (1985). The chief sound engineer is Eddie Axberg.

This is the sixth film by Lasse Hallström but the first to have a theatrical release in the United States. A 1983 novel by Reidar Jönsson is the source of the screenplay, which Jönsson wrote with Hallström and Brasse Brännström. The resulting picture joins the ranks of distinguished films about children, Duvivier's *Poil de carotte* (1932), Benoît-Lévy's *La Maternelle* (1933), Grede's *Hugo and Josephine* (1967), and Ritt's *Conrack* (1974) among them. The particular insight in *My Life as a Dog* about children—at least around this boy's age—is that, no matter how deeply they feel, they tend to hide or disguise their feelings. For instance, when this boy's beloved mother is being taken out of the house to an ambulance and to her almost certain death, he sits under a table as she is carried by and whistles. Throughout, the boy's scrapes, troubles, gaffes, sillinesses, and jokes are his secret code for his hurts and loves and hopes. Only two or three times are emotions expressed directly: the rest is cipher, delicate and true.

Hallström insured his film with the casting of the boy. Anton Glanzelius has exactly the right urchin face—at least we find out it's exactly right—to mislead grown-ups into thinking he's a mere mischief-maker, and also to be a transparent mask for the tumults inside him, which he creates movingly. Another child, Melinda Kinnaman, is excellent as a tomboy who becomes his pal, then his adorer. Adults are of course easier to cast and direct, but that's small reason to slight Anki

Lidén, as the boy's desperate tubercular mother, or Tomas von Brömssen, as her brother, a funny-looking, warmhearted uncle to the boy.

It's the 1950s. Glanzelius and his dog and his older brother live with their ailing mother in a city apartment. (The father, mysteriously described as loading bananas down on the equator, never appears.) To let their mother rest, Glanzelius—without his dog—is sent to his uncle and aunt in a village where the uncle works in a glass factory. (His brother is sent elsewhere.) This is where he meets the tomboy and a marvelous collection of village eccentrics. At the end of summer he returns home; soon after, his mother goes into the hospital and dies. This time, again without his dog, he is sent permanently to his uncle and aunt, arriving in a dramatically different snowbound village, and goes to school there. Some time later, after repeatedly asking when his dog will join him, he is told that his dog has died too—and he knows that this means it was put away. His reaction is to grin—*grin*—and to go around barking and attempting to bite people's legs: until he breaks down and cries, and ultimately adjusts to the two deaths. On his scale the dog's death is not much less important than his mother's.

The incidents of the story, all of them interesting, some of them full of cranky, small-town good feeling, are not really the foreground of the piece. Character is—the boy's and everyone else's in the film. Few of the characters are strikingly original; all of them are realized and affecting.

Hallström has devised an apt punctuation-linkage for his film. At the end of most episodes, especially those in which the boy has goofed off or gotten into trouble, the camera moves in on a starry sky as we hear the boy speak about disasters he has read of and how he is better off even after what has happened to him. The recurrent comparison he makes is with Laika, the dog that the Soviets sent into space with insufficient food. That story scored the boy's mind and makes him capable of compassion even when he is distressed.

One incident, photographed in golden light, runs through the film like a refrain. The boy keeps remembering a moment with his mother at a lake when he did a backflip and made her laugh. How he treasures that laugh. Hallström's film thus defines yet again the difference between sentiment and sentimentality. It never remotely approaches the latter. It is much too funny and melancholy.

***The Two Lives of Mattia Pascal*, Mario Monicelli, 1985**

(The New Republic, 18 April 1988)

I declare an interest in *The Two Lives of Mattia Pascal* (1985): several years ago some of the cast and crew booked into a hotel outside Cortona, in Tuscany, where I was staying. But they arrived just a day or so before I left, so perhaps I can

comment on the film with no more prejudice than an unshakable one toward Tuscany (visible in some of the scenes).

Mario Monicelli's version is the latest in a line of at least two previous films of Pirandello's *The Late Mattia Pascal*. In this updated version of the 1904 novel, about a man who devises a second identity and life for himself, Marcello Mastroianni plays Mattia. This is doubly fortunate. First, because Mastroianni is actually alert and vital throughout, which he was not in his last Pirandello outing, *Henry IV* (1984). Second, because, when Mastroianni bothers to act, he is not only one of the best actors in screen history, he is irresistibly appealing, and his role, as constructed in this adaptation, needs all the appeal it can get. Mattia has small regard for anyone but himself.

He runs away from home and wife because he's in trouble and escape is more pleasant than the suicide he has been contemplating. Gambling brings him money and a move to Rome; there, under another name, he meets another young woman and more troubles. The pair flees to Venice, where Mattia gets into still more trouble and abandons his adoring companion, now pregnant. Under his own name, Mattia returns to his hometown and to a much more comfortable life, uxorially speaking, than the one he left. This chronicle of self-gratifying laziness needs a lot of magnetism, and Mastroianni supplies it, fully.

Monicelli's career has had a lot of downs but some excellent ups: *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (1958), *The Great War* (1959), and *The Organizer* (1963, with Mastroianni at his best), a masterpiece too little known. He made *Mattia Pascal* for a group of European television networks—with the star's brother, Ruggero Mastroianni, very distinguished in his own field, as the film editor. Like many other European made-for-TV films, *Mattia Pascal* shows no trace of its broadcast destination. No composition is constrained by the demands of the box, and the editing doesn't cling to close-ups. This is a fluent *film*, not a TV movie transferred to the big screen.

The Mass Is Ended, Nanni Moretti, 1985

(*The New Republic*, 30 May 1988)

Why—*why*—have they been keeping Nanni Moretti from us? This Italian filmmaker (born 1953) has written and directed five features, in all of which he played leading roles; but almost the only Americans who know of his existence are those who have read such a book as Peter Bondanella's *Italian Cinema* (1983). Now Moretti gets his first theatrical release in the United States with *The Mass Is Ended* (1985) and it's clear that we have been deprived.

Moretti is tall, lean, slightly hoarse, appealing without any prettiness or aggressive charm. The silliest remark I've read about him is that he is the Woody Allen of Italy. Not only is there no resemblance to Allen in persona or looks, Moretti is a genuine actor of considerable range, not a stand-up comic who has trained himself to stay away from shtick. And Moretti's screenplay is more soundly integrated than any Allen screenplay I know.

After this loud preamble, there's an impulse to caution the reader that *The Mass Is Ended* is not an earth-shaking film, just a lovely, humane comedy-drama, somewhat in the vein of what Luigi Comencini and Mario Monicelli were doing in the 1950s and '60s. But entertaining though it is, it's more than that. When you first see the paintings of Chardin, you think they are deft and pleasant and warm; then you keep thinking about them.

Moretti plays a priest, but we don't know that immediately. We first see him in an ordinary shirt in the morning sun in front of his little house on an island. Then he strips off his shirt and, in trunks, dives into the sea. (Besides the fact that Moretti is introducing the man before the priest, he is also slyly seducing us with Italian hills and sky and sea.) Next we see Moretti in his robes performing a wedding ceremony in his little church. When the couple climb into a motorboat to start their honeymoon, Moretti gets in, too, with some bags. He is leaving the island.

He has been transferred to Rome, his hometown, to a small church on the outskirts, fallen into disrepair. But at least he is now able to visit his (well-to-do) parents and sister, all of whom he loves. He is also able to visit his pals from his pre-priestly days. One of them is turning hyperreligious; one is a terrorist on trial; one has become a latter-day Oblomov because of disappointments in love; one, a bookseller, is revealed as homosexual. (Books, by the way, are conspicuous in everyone's home.) As if these troubles were not enough, Moretti discovers that his church has lost its parishioners because the previous priest got married and now lives across the road with his wife and little son.

Moretti, assisted on the screenplay by Sandro Petraglia, ensures that the structure is more than an album of interesting people or a cross section of current Italian problems or a gamut of trials for the priest; though it *is* all these, it's a unified work. All the strands are finely interwoven, all the characters are urgent, vital. The cast is perfect, and I wish there were a more perfect word to describe their perfection. Moretti has obviously chosen his actors for their aptness, and just by doing so, he has also assembled a gallery of marvelous faces. The faces themselves speak. Only one of them was recognizable to me from previous films—Margarita Lozano, who plays Moretti's mother. Surely she is the most beautiful older woman on the screen today, with a beauty heightened by experience undergone and comprehended.

The tenor of the film's intent and of the priest's character is strongly hinted near the start. In his new quarters he is sitting on his shabby bed when a football comes through the window. He takes it into the yard to a group of boys who back up as he walks toward them silently. Then, as we anticipate, he suddenly kicks the ball and joins the game. He trips and falls headlong. Then, as we do not anticipate, the boys keep on playing, paying him no heed whatsoever. Spencer Tracy would have won their hearts by playing with them. Not Moretti.

With virtually every problem he faces, he meets disappointment. He is neither stupid nor clumsy: he is simply not able to bring enough that is useful to each difficulty, and there is no suggestion that his relative youth is the trouble. The dilemma is more subtle. He is a sincere priest. For most of his friends and his family, religion is not remote; they are Catholic. The film seems to be saying that there are now areas in life that neither dedicated priesthood nor organized religion can quite touch. At the end he leaves his now-restored church for one in Tierra del Fuego, for a few lonely parishioners who will need him.

One negative virtue of *The Mass Is Ended* is the absence of carnal temptation for the priest. As soon as we see that the protagonist is a young, good-looking cleric, we brace ourselves for the scene of temptation. It never arrives. What we do get, and which is much more interesting, not to say more comic, is the abundance of sexual problems in the people with whom he has to deal, including his father. Making his own confession, Moretti tells a friar that all his parishioners confess sexual sins to him because they know such sins are venial. No one ever talks about real sins, like injuries to other human beings. (A Benedictine once told me the same thing about confessions that he had heard.)

Yet this priest is neither sanctimonious nor namby-pamby. He is full of fire, of temper. Some of his more blatant errors come from his temper, as in a courtroom where he is summoned to testify for his terrorist friend. The one small blotch on the film is tied to his temper: after his sister quarrels with him and leaves, he punches his fist through a window. It's the one cinematic platitude in the picture.

Moretti as director—there's another extremely pleasant subject. To say that he is utterly competent is not enough. Gradually, through the film, we realize that we are not merely seeing the secure professional handling of every scene: in almost every scene, something is being done with the place and the composition to enrich the moment and the whole. For instance, after his father leaves home for a younger woman, the priest goes to see his mother. He is standing in the somewhat dim hall of their luxurious apartment, his back to us, looking at his mother in the room beyond. She is seated quietly on the sofa facing the sunlight to our left. The shot is lovely, but not gratuitously so. It crystallizes his view of his mother, and it also bespeaks the new light that has burst upon her. He moves

out of the corridor into the room, and the camera follows to join mother and son in new, painful closeness.

How many other film artists like Moretti are there, O sages of film export and import? So many who write and direct and act at this level that you can afford to dally with Moretti's films? We now have *The Mass Is Ended*, but what about, for example, his *Golden Dreams* (1981)? It won a prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1981, and Bondanella said that "it may well turn out to be the 8½ of the 1980s." The 1980s are almost over. Why are we kept waiting?

Postscript. Last week I reviewed Nanni Moretti's *The Mass Is Ended*, the fifth film by this gifted writer-director-actor and the first to get theatrical release in the United States. I wondered when we would have the chance to see his previous films. An answer—not final, I hope—came in a few days from the New York press after the opening of *The Mass Is Ended*. The reviews I've read have been tepid to adverse and will certainly not hasten the American release of more Moretti. I've been to see *The Mass Is Ended* a second time and, apropos the other critics, can only echo Bernard Shaw's words on a different occasion: Why was I born with such contemporaries?

***Hannah and Her Sisters*, Woody Allen, 1986**

(*The New Republic*, 10 February 1986)

Woody Allen's new film *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) is about Hannah and her two sisters and her parents and her husband and her ex-husband and her sisters' various boyfriends. Of all these characters the most vivid is the ex-husband, played by Allen, and for a dismal reason: it's the same old Allen performance—the sniveling New York Jew, neurotic, self-deprecating, lecherous, trying to win women and us through the candid display of unattractiveness. At least we know this Allen persona, whatever his current name; the other characters, starting from scratch, don't get much past scratch. Although the picture spreads its attention fairly evenly among them, most of them end up as supporting cast because they are only life-sized puppets.

The picture begins and ends with Thanksgiving dinners given by Hannah, played by Mia Farrow. She is married to Michael Caine and was previously married to Allen. Her parents are show folk played by Maureen O'Sullivan (Farrow's actual mother) and Lloyd Nolan (who died after the film was finished). One sister, Dianne Wiest, is a failing actress-singer who does cocaine. The other, Barbara Hershey, no occupation given, lives with a middle-aged Soho painter, Max von Sydow.

Everyone has a problem, of course, large or less large, self-created or inflicted by others. Set in Manhattan, the film interweaves all these problems; often with voice-over comment by the principal person in a sequence, with an epigraph before each sequence. Hannah, though principal in the title, is the dullest of the lot, not because of Farrow but because the character is simply a patient ninny whose problem consists of not understanding why her husband is paying her less attention than usual. Caine, whose cockney presence in this group is unexplained, is smitten with her sister, Hershey; ultimately maneuvers himself into an affair with her; and persuades her to leave von Sydow. The (quite secret) affair continues until Hershey takes courses at Columbia and falls for her professor. Wiest finally gives up the theater—actually, it's more vice versa—and tries writing. She and Allen had gone out on one disastrous date after his divorce; now he takes up with her again, and this time clicks. O'Sullivan and Nolan supply background steeped in contention: their troubles are caused by Ma's still-wandering eye.

The script gives the impression that Allen, who wrote it, keeps notes. He jots down Manhattan phenomena (Tower Records, Bobby Short) and problems or odd situations. When he has enough of these—and even when he doesn't—he sorts them out into little stacks, gives them names, and assumes that they are characters. With the exception of the elderly parents and of Allen, none of the nominal characters seems the habitation of a particularized human being; each seems a folder pulled from a file. Allen, much like Neil Simon in method if not tone, deals in recognitions. We spot the hang-ups as we spot the locales. And, again like Simon, Allen makes sure that, no matter how stormy the sea of troubles, almost everyone ends up safe. *Interiors* (1978), Allen's worst disaster, was also about three sisters and their troubled parents and troubled love lives, and it was further burdened by his film-school imitation of Bergman. He steers clear of Bergmanizing here (although the casting of von Sydow is apparently both a homage and a signal of gravity). But *Hannah and Her Sisters* cuts no deeper than *Interiors* and, if less hokey, is almost equally tedious.

Once again, Allen wants us to treat him seriously because he treats serious matters; for example, a childless couple who ask the husband of a couple they know for artificial insemination; cocaine; an irresistible affair that especially tries the loyalties of the pair because the man is the husband of the woman's sister. But Allen never asks himself what he can add, in perception, to what we already know about his subjects. We are meant to gush with gratitude merely because we are being spared another picture about teenagers or space adventure or espionage. And then, to certify his exalted state, he veneers his film with culture: quotations from Tolstoy and E. E. Cummings, bits of Puccini and Bach. These merit badges only make the body of the picture look more spindly.

Because of von Sydow's presence, because of the attempted spectrum of comfy people's problems, I couldn't help thinking of another film made—as *Hannah and Her Sisters* is, even at a remove—under the influence of Bergman. *Wetherby* (1985), written and directed by David Hare, committed cinematic gaffes and ended only by presenting its characters; but most of them *were* characters, fixed by intelligence and delineated with art. Our disappointment was in not getting what the film's very texture promised. In *Hannah* there are no disappointments because, as we soon see, there are only lean expectations.

The performances are as quasi-anesthetic as the script. O'Sullivan and Nolan at least have some salt. Farrow does what she can, but in an actor's sense she has nothing to do, though it's a big part. Compliments about her versatility—after the tough moll in *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984) and the dishrag in the *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985)—will have to wait until she gets more than monochrome parts. Caine, usually a nicely inflected actor, is somewhat stolid here. Von Sydow valiantly tries to make something of an utterly clichéd role—a painter who resents cheap patrons, a middle-aged lover who knows his love is doomed. Hershey, though less physically compelling than she used to be, still has some appeal, if not much talent. Wiest, for me, is another Glenn Close: technical competence that relentlessly reveals shallowness.

Allen stands out, more by default than design. Here he's a TV producer, with the same old nerves and hypochondria. The one really gripping moment in his performance—in the film—comes after extensive hospital examinations when he is told that he has an inoperable brain tumor. This, I thought, is a splendid idea: to make a comic hypochondriac face a dreadful reality. This, I thought, is a real leap, an act of daring, a true exploration for Allen. My expectation lasted about twelve seconds. The announcement of the tumor is only his fantasy, another facet of his hypochondria. Back Allen sinks into the familiar. Inevitably some of what he says and does is funny. After his “escape” from death, he seeks the meaning of life by investigating religion—Catholicism and Buddhism; and he gets some laughs out of his quest. But it all goes nowhere, except for the usual snug ending, as he puts his act on hold for his next picture.

His directing continues at the good level he first established in *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982), though once in a while *Hannah and Her Sisters* is tempted into the showy (like the circling of the restaurant table when the three sisters have lunch). Carlo di Palma, the gifted Italian cinematographer (*Red Desert* [1964], *Blow-Up* [1966]), does his very considerable best for *Hannah*.

Two Nits Picked. The New York church that Allen approaches in his Catholic phase is not Catholic. The name of the harpsichordist in the Bach concerto is Gustav Leonhardt, not the other way around.

Sid and Nancy, Alex Cox, 1986 (*The New Republic*, 27 October 1986)

All the advance facts about *Sid and Nancy* (1986) were unpromising. A biographical film—"docudrama" was the term flung about—of the English punk rocker Sid Vicious and his American girlfriend Nancy Spungen; the punk scene of the 1970s; the concurrent drug scene; Sid's murder of Nancy in New York and his subsequent death of a drug overdose.

In proof, all these facts accurately describe the picture, but only factually: in quality, it turns out to be quite the opposite of sweaty exploitation. *Sid and Nancy* is hard yet compassionate, grueling yet imaginative, with two well-realized central characters, not two pop myths or two assemblages of data or two pat TV-epic symbols of social disorder. One of the reasons *Sid and Nancy* hold us is that, all the way down their sordid descent, they have some sense of self-created fate. They are knowing yet helpless victims of their own oppression.

The project began with the director, Alex Cox, an Oxonian who attended the UCLA film school. Cox's first feature was the 1984 film *Repo Man* (a man who repossesses cars on which money is due), which was itself a dim promise for his next work. *Repo Man* was made to be a cult film. This cult is the audience of the young and less young who want heavily stylized films of near-camp grotesqueries that the viewer can simultaneously soak in and patronize. (*Blue Velvet* [1986] is a current example.) Since I'm not a member of the cult, *Repo Man* was for me an adequately made bore. *Sid and Nancy* has none of that precious appeal for coterie support. It's a film of intense realism with its realism heightened by surreal touches. There are nightmares and fantasies, but the veristic material is so acutely understood and rendered that the verism, too, becomes nightmare.

With Abbe Wool, another product of the UCLA film school, Cox wrote a script that is like a passage through a circle of hell, all the more infernal because it is earthly. Nothing is done to "explain" *Sid and Nancy*. We know from his accent that he is a cockney. We're told that she is American, a groupie who has come to London because of another rock star and who then meets Sid. Later, they visit her family somewhere in America, but this doesn't explain Nancy (especially since her family views her as a total loss). The pair meet in the middle of whirling, noisy glitz; they love and fight and wreck themselves with drugs; then he kills her and subsequently kills himself. Their existence, almost in the manner of medieval morality plays, is taken as the explanation of their existence.

A few slow-motion touches intrude. (Money floats through the air a couple of times to symbolize the passage of time and Sid's success.) A few fast-forward touches also intrude, for weird comedy. But, overwhelmingly, Cox has written and

directed with distinction and with courage: he faces squarely all the platitudes in this kind of story and vitalizes them with his insistence that these two are not stock items from another drugs-and-rock saga. John Seale, the cinematographer, sees the wry side of all the parvenu luxury, and also sees the series of messy hotel rooms as shadowy torture chambers.

Gary Oldman and Chloe Webb, the Sid and Nancy, are genuine actors, not free riders on facile naturalistic speech and gesture. They consider and create every moment of the wasting of these characters' lives as punctiliously as if they were following an etiquette of self-destruction. With Cox's help, Oldman and Webb give us two atoms blowing through contemporary waste, atoms that, after scrutiny, have names and faces. Inevitably *Sid and Nancy* has been called a punk *Romeo and Juliet*, an instance of true love blooming amidst decay. But these two lovers drug themselves out of passion and into dependency. They cling to each other, not to keep from drowning but to drown together. They don't particularly want to be dead, but they want to die together. After he knifes her, in the middle of a foggy quarrel, his life in effect stops with hers.

The last sequence, a fantasy, is wonderfully apt. I won't describe it; I'll note only that their idea of paradise is the only moment in this somber film that is poignant.

***Round Midnight*, Bertrand Tavernier, 1986**

(*The New Republic*, 3 November 1986)

Bertrand Tavernier's career shows a tension between strengths and sentimentalities. Such splendid works as *Let Joy Reign Supreme* (1975) and *The Judge and the Assassin* (1976) have soft spots of overemphasis. In lesser films such as *Coup de Torchon* (1981) and *A Sunday in the Country* (1984), the softness swamps the strength. Tavernier's latest, *Round Midnight* (1986), is not a complete swamping, but it's soggy.

Arturo Toscanini reportedly said that Bruno Walter was a fine conductor but he loved the beautiful passages too much. In his new film Tavernier loves jazz too much. He is so in love with it that instead of directing his film, he lets his love of it direct. He showed signs of this musical dereliction earlier. In 1985, with the American Robert Parrish, he made a documentary called *Mississippi Blues* (1983), which dealt mostly with the music he found in Mississippi and which meandered in adulation. *Round Midnight*, a fiction film about black American jazz musicians in Paris in 1959, meanders somewhat differently but with the same slack-jawed sentimentality.

The source of the script by Tavernier and David Rayfiel—and the reason for the date of the story—is the friendship between Bud Powell and a Parisian jazz devotee named Francis Paudras. The script alters both names, and Tavernier has cast the musician's role with the famous saxophonist Dexter Gordon. Gordon arrives in Paris to play at a small club; François Cluzet, an impoverished commercial artist, hovers in the rain next to a window of the club in order to hear him. Eventually they become friends. Cluzet takes the alcoholic musician to live with him and his small daughter so that the idolater can care for the idol. Cluzet then borrows money from his estranged wife to get a bigger apartment; he accompanies Gordon to New York when the saxophonist feels he has finished with Paris; keeps Gordon straight there; then goes home to his child and job. The film ends with Gordon's return to France and to triumph.

Not an impossible idea for a film. But Tavernier does a lot to bog it down. He not only loves jazz, he is obviously in awe of his leading performer. Gordon is a large, slow, humorous, husky-voiced, magnetic man, and (as far as I can judge) his music is good. But the camera follows him like a wide-eyed fan, asking little more of him than that he be himself in front of it. Much of what Gordon says and does is amusing and sad, but not everything. Some of the time I didn't even understand the words he was speaking, and some of the rest of the time was devoted to the nobly tacit suffering of an artist's soul in a gross world. This suffering—in films, anyway—always seems to be more of an agony with jazz artists than with any other kind.

Tavernier abets his uncritical worship with narrative syrup. Cluzet, who is like Dustin Hoffman except in talent, tells Gordon that Gordon's music changed his life. How? We never see any trace of this in any way. Cluzet and his daughter have the fierce tacit understandings that French actors and their screen daughters specialize in. (We later see Gordon and his daughter in New York, without tacit understanding.) A former girlfriend of Gordon's, Lonette McKee, passes through Paris, and they have tacit understandings. Cluzet and his estranged wife have sufficient tacit understanding so that she lends him money to move and later comes back to him. As for the very last scene, apparently Tavernier tacitly understands that audiences love a finish like the end of Streisand's *A Star Is Born* (1976).

The script, which is mostly in English, moves between the gnomic diction of jazz insiders and the desperately orotund. A jazz musician explains Gordon's drinking to Cluzet: "When you have to explore every night, even the most beautiful things you find can be the most painful." Tavernier's uncharacteristically lax camera work reflects his prostration before his subject. He doesn't seem to have any more ideas about the camera than to pull back or to close in at the start of a shot or to start a shot by scrutinizing a room—moving around the furnishings until he finds a person. The acute control of his best films, the ones cited earlier plus *The Clockmaker* (1974) and *A Week's Vacation* (1980), is disquietingly absent.

Doting on America has been a snare for postwar Europeans from Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) to Wenders' *Paris, Texas* (1984). Tavernier now joins them—temporarily, I hope. Isn't there anything at home that excites or enrages Tavernier as before? This film, even in its Paris sections, is tourist's gush.

***Man Facing Southeast*, Eliseo Subiela, 1986**

(*The New Republic*, 6 April 1987)

An extraordinary début. In fact it's the director's second film, but (I think) the first to come this way. Eliseo Subiela, a forty-three-year-old Argentine, wrote and directed *Man Facing Southeast* (1986) with the courage of his conviction about it. Another film about a visitor from outer space? Another film about a psychiatrist and a patient so close that they become allied against the medical establishment? Yes, said Subiela.

The venture rests not only on his conviction about the material but also on his surety that he could get the element of quiet into the film—the feeling of hush in the midst of bustle. The principal setting is a mental hospital in Buenos Aires, a setting fixed for us under the credits with shots of empty corridors, with remote sounds and the tolling of a bell that fades abruptly on its last note. By the time the action begins, an atmosphere has been evoked of loneliness and echo, of sequestration, of small enclosure within large space.

Subiela tells his story with the same suggestions of invisible imprisonments. His manner of looking at scenes with angles of tacit discovery, the rhythms that carry his characters along as on a slow current—these combine to create the sense, fanciful yet inescapable, that the camera itself is gradually becoming persuaded about the strange matters before it.

That story begins—as the psychiatrist himself agrees—in a fairly routine way. A check of the hospital roster discloses an extra patient. This is reported to a staff doctor, played by Lorenzo Quinteros (who—coincidentally—resembles Michelangelo Antonioni). He finds the extra man playing the organ beautifully in the hospital chapel. This patient, acted with poise and depth by Hugo Soto, tells the doctor that he has come from outer space, that he and others from his home have taken human shape in order to study the inhuman behavior of human beings. Quinteros tags the man with one of the categories of mental illness and is not swerved by the fact that Soto stands silently for hours at a time in the hospital courtyard, always facing southeast, in order (he says) to receive messages from his home out in space. But more and more evidence makes Quinteros doubt his first view: Soto's skills in the pathology lab where he has asked to assist, his messianic effect on fellow patients, the testimony of a young woman who has known Soto

outside, and the doctor's growing affection for this serene patient. Beyond all this, Soto's sorrowful comments on human life, like those of a compassionate tourist, make the doctor examine his own condition: his misery in his empty apartment as he runs home movies of his children, who live with his estranged wife, as he drinks and toots his saxophone.

After the point at which the doctor begins to doubt his diagnosis, we begin to worry about the ending. How can this situation be resolved? Subiela handles it aptly by not really resolving it. If he had done even less to resolve it—had omitted such supernatural touches as an exhibition of psychokinesis—the film would have ended more clearly unclear: ambiguous, unsettling. Was the patient from outer space or an idiot savant? A clever psychopath, or are there, in the Arthur C. Clarke vein, superior intelligences in space worrying about us?

But whatever the script's shortcomings, Subiela's direction gives the film the breadth of a musical largo.

***Devil in the Flesh*, Marco Bellocchio, 1986**

(*The New Republic*, 15 June 1987)

Excelsior! Fellatio has reached the screen. It's been common in porno films ever since there were such; it's been frequently suggested off-screen for at least twenty years in American and foreign non-pornographic cinema; it's been candidly mentioned in movies. Now it can be seen in a non-pornographic work.

I cite this at the start because it's the most memorable aspect of *Devil in the Flesh* (1986). This is a sorry statement—not because notoriety will obscure high quality but because, in this case, it won't: the film marks a further decline in a director-writer of great promise and some achievement. Marco Bellocchio made his feature debut in 1965 with *Fists in the Pocket* (1965), an overheated but excellently acted family drama; followed it with *China Is Near* (1967), a strong political picture; and followed that one with *In the Name of the Father* (1972), a perceptive, bitter story of adolescent boys. At that point he seemed to me “the best Italian director of his (mid-thirties) generation.” Since then, disintegration: the kind that comes from the dwindling of material and the inflation of style. *Victory March* (1976), *Leap into the Void* (1980), and *The Eyes, the Mouth* (1982) were caricatures of serious films, full of *angst*-for-sale, salon photography, elliptical action, and posing by actors and director alike—high art for the gullible. These films were followed by his 1984 version of Pirandello's *Henry IV* (1922), which was just a smear on the play.

Now Bellocchio is back to his own windy Phase Two with a film tenuously derived from Raymond Radiguet's 1923 novel of the same title. Like the book, this *Devil in the Flesh* has as its center an affair between a youth and an older

woman—here an eighteen-year-old schoolboy and a woman in her mid-twenties who is engaged—but the rest has been invented by Bellocchio and his two script collaborators. The additions include Red Brigade terrorism and father-son tension: the son's lover is a patient of the father's, a psychoanalyst who himself fantasizes about the woman.

Back and forth the film scans this landscape like a swiveling TV camera in a bank, but nothing is realized in the various themes, individually or in conjunction. Nothing of Radiguet's rite-of-passage for the youth is retained: this schoolboy is an experienced amorist. Nothing is articulated by the woman, Maruschka Detmers, about any difference between the youth, Federico Pitzalis, and her fiancé, who is one of a number of terrorists now on trial. Nothing is made of the neurosis from which Detmers is said to suffer; although we see some tantrums, they add up to little more than irrelevant volatility. No relationship is made between the radical politics around the picture and the sex at its center.

At the end Detmers skips her wedding (her fiancé has been released) in order to sit at the back of the classroom when her young lover appears for his finals before his school's examining board. But does this mean that she is leaving her fiancé for the boy? Or, with her moodiness, will she be back to marry her betrothed the next day? And in any case, what of it? All that the picture delivers finally is the implication that it is stupid to ask these questions, that only clods would fail to grasp the profundities of such a work.

Possibly unintentionally, the film does raise one clear issue: pornography. Freedom of utterance is having difficulty enough in these Meese-laden days, and I'm not about to join any movement to hobble that freedom; but filmmakers take advantage of my nobility. They linger on frank lovemaking to prove their fearless honesty or to titillate—or both—and, doing so, they seem to smile smugly at libertarians. Horizontal activities in films of the last decade or so are past number. The ultimate thus far was in Beineix's *Betty Blue* (1986), where, I think, the couple in the opening shot was really copulating. Still, this wasn't completely explicit—that is, I could be wrong. Now, in *Devil in the Flesh*, we see Detmers, full screen, her head in the youth's lap, unzip his fly, take out his organ, and proceed. For me, the only question about explicit sex is necessity. The bath that the woman gives the man in Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes* (1964) is one of the most erotic scenes I know and is essential to the film. But (to disregard its other protracted nuzzlings), if the fellatio had been omitted from *Devil in the Flesh*, what would have been lost? Only Bellocchio's chance to dare us to object, just as he dares us to question the thematic clarity of the picture.

Detmers and Pitzalis are good. She is much more colorful than she was in Godard's 1983 film *First Name: Carmen*. (Perhaps this is because she has been dubbed in Italian, and the other voice sounds livelier.) But does the increase in

screen permissiveness alter the requirements for screen acting? Will applicants be required to demonstrate various sexual proficiencies? Are clauses about fellatio and cunnilingus to become standard in film contracts? If so, I hope that the performers will at least have the right to agree that the sex is essential. That agreement could be the first line of defense—moral defense, anyway—against the Ed Meese types. (For the record, on May 21, 1984, President Ronald Reagan announced his intention to appoint Meese, the soon-to-be Attorney General, to study the effect of pornography on society. The Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, often called the Meese Report, convened in the spring of 1985 and published its findings—that pornography was in varying degrees harmful—in July 1986.)

Bellocchio's first three films were, by statement or atmospherics, Marxist. Now Marxism seems to be *passé* for him, if not a topic of derision. The fiancé, on trial for a political crime, declares that he has left Marxism for the Church. When Pitzalis takes his exams, he scoffs at the professor who assumes that he is a Marxist. While Detmers performs the oral sex act, Pitzalis recounts Lenin's journey to the Finland Station. Some estranged Marxists—Bellocchio seems to be one—apparently become frantically sexual, especially as they grow middle-aged. Godard, no longer a voluble Maoist, uses women's naked bodies as décor. And Bellocchio uses his actors sexually like a belatedly born capitalist exploiter.

***Full Metal Jacket*, Stanley Kubrick, 1987**

(*The New Republic*, 27 July 1987)

The best that can be said of *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) is that there are traces of Stanley Kubrick in it. This, obviously, is also the worst that can be said of it. Kubrick's new film, his first in eight years, is about the Vietnam War. After years of preparation in the hands of a man celebrated for his penetration and style, the picture adds almost nothing to our knowledge of its subject and adds it in a manner almost devoid of visual distinction.

War has been a recurrent Kubrick theme: Roman revolt (*Spartacus*, 1960), World War I (*Paths of Glory*, 1957), a future Armageddon (*Dr. Strangelove*, 1964). Each of these was in its way a humane statement and a fulfilled film. Subsequently Kubrick slid into self-indulgences, hermetic preenings. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) abandoned narrative and characterization for cinematic and technological gamboling. *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) was a shockingly banal treatment of future shock. *Barry Lyndon* (1980) was a clumsy scaffold for precious picture-making. *The Shining* (1980) grabbed sweatily for pseudo-profundities in a gimmicky horror story. Some critics have applauded Kubrick's "evolution"—his liberation from

aesthetically inhibiting humanism. If one could honestly eliminate the quotation marks, then Kubrick could be placed somewhere in the company of, among others, Syberberg and Jancsó, who have burst past the territory of traditional narrative, traditional humanism, to dominions of their own. But *Full Metal Jacket* betrays Kubrick's avant-garde admirers. It makes no advances in anti-traditional art. In fact, its small rewards are conventionally humanistic.

The title describes the cartridges in a Marine rifle. Kubrick wrote the screenplay with Michael Herr, author of *Dispatches* (1977), and Gustav Hasford, author of *The Short-Timers* (1979), the novel on which the screenplay is based. The script is the first—and the last—trouble. Much of it is trite, and its three main sections are not well joined. Part One is set in Parris Island, South Carolina, the U.S. Marine Corps boot camp; and it begins—can you believe this?—with a tough drill instructor chewing out a group of raw recruits. This whole long training-camp sequence suggests that all American drill instructors, in all the armed forces, are rehearsed by Hollywood. (“No, sergeant! Try it again, and don’t pause after ‘shit-head’—read right through to the next line.”) Throughout this training-camp sequence, we wonder if Kubrick has been so sequestered, so solipsistically bent, that he hasn’t seen any of the nearly identical sequences in many films of the last decade. His one new touch is to include a recruit whose unsuitability to the Corps molders into psychosis, resulting in murder and suicide; but Kubrick telegraphs the man’s approaching breakdown with elephantine touches—like close-ups of the man’s eyes turning almost inward. And Kubrick leaves us wondering why the Marines accepted this overweight applicant, allowed him to remain overweight, and retained him despite his ludicrous inadequacy. (Two of the combat trainees wear eyeglasses; apparently this is not extraordinary.)

The double killing is witnessed by another recruit, Private Joker. (All the characters have nicknames of the kind found in *Catch-22* [1970].) Up to that point Joker has been only slightly distinguished from the group he’s in; suddenly he becomes the film’s protagonist. We cut to Vietnam, to Danang, where Joker is now attached to *Stars and Stripes* as a correspondent. Part Two consists principally of cynical conferences of the newspaper’s staff, after which Joker and a photographer are sent up to the Hue area, seemingly as a punishment for flippancy at a staff meeting. Part Three takes place around the time of the Tet offensive early in 1968. Joker is attached to a squad that is sent out on patrol; they encounter and ultimately kill a sniper who first kills several of the squad. That sequence is by far the most engrossing in the film, but it relies almost entirely on the most commonplace of battle action and dialogue. And Kubrick shows a hint of desperation: he heightens suspense by inserting some angles from the sniper’s point of view—one of those formal breaches that wouldn’t matter if they didn’t obtrude.

In the very last sequence a large body of Marines moves slowly through ravaged terrain, in ghastly light, singing the Mickey Mouse Club song. It's a last-ditch attempt to claim a bitter-satire badge for the film.

For me, a pressing question was: What does *Full Metal Jacket* add after *Platoon* (1986)? Concede that Kubrick made his picture as an entity in itself and that, ideally, it ought to be so considered. Experientially this is impossible. To answer my question, I went to see *Platoon* again—and Kubrick's picture diminished further. *Platoon*, for all its soggy voice-over letters to grandma, begins from its first moment to weave a visual texture of immediacy, of gravity, that the good acting and dialogue only substantiate. Kubrick, renowned as a cunning stylist, has made most of his film merely competently and, in Part One, predictably. Structurally *Platoon* is simple but cohesive: a newcomer's tour of duty. Structurally *Full Metal Jacket* is episodic, uncumulative. Part One could be dropped completely without markedly damaging the rest. The killings in the boot camp toilet have nothing to do with what follows. Joker witnesses those killings, and it is Joker who finally dispatches the wounded sniper at the end; but that ending would not suffer a whit without that beginning. And as for satirical tone, the banter in the *Stars and Stripes* office, the gags between members of Joker's squad, the Mickey Mouse song at the end—all are placid grotesquerie compared with the counterpoint of gallows humor in *Platoon*. (Joker has the words "Born to Kill" lettered on his helmet, and he also wears a peace symbol on his tunic; he says—he actually says—that this contradiction represents "the duality of man.")

A few elements in Kubrick's film remind us of the director that was. After the deaths in the toilet, he cuts sharply to the behind of a miniskirted Vietnamese prostitute as she walks toward a café table where Joker and a friend are seated. The walk leads to a conversation and a camera-snatching by a thief in one smooth flavorful sequence that establishes us in the new environment. After the sniper is wounded in the last section—it's a young woman—the squad surrounds her; and the camera circles the Marines' faces as we hear the suffering woman plead, "Shoot me." Joker, adequately played by Matthew Modine, brings himself to do it. A moving moment. And the setting of the sniper episode is excellent, the best kind of realistic design: it combines verity with ingenious shapes that propel the action forward. The designer was Anton Furst, but it's generally believed that Kubrick oversees, more than oversees, everything.

Three elements in a long film, a film that wouldn't enlighten us much about Vietnam even if *Platoon*—or the earlier *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978, and soon to be re-released)—did not exist. Lately Kubrick said of the adverse critical response to his recent work that "everybody's always expecting the last movie again, and they're sometimes angry—I mean some critics—because they're expecting something

else.” This critic was certainly expecting something else: not, heaven forbid, Kubrick’s last movie, but the reappearance of his former skill and pungency. Not forthcoming. *Full Metal Jacket* seems further proof that Kubrick is still trapped in self-pleasing cinematic exercise.

***Hamburger Hill*, John Irvin, 1987** (*The New Republic*,
14 & 21 September 1987)

Less than a year after the release of *Platoon* (1986), the American film world has another reason to be proud. *Hamburger Hill* (1987) treats combat in the Vietnam War with a candor that equals that of *Platoon* and in some ways goes past it; and no one can be charged with following a trend because obviously *Hamburger Hill* went into production long before anyone knew that *Platoon* would be a hit.

The film began, we’re told, with the writer, Jim Carabatsos, who was encouraged by the producer, Marcia Nasatir. Carabatsos, who served in Vietnam, has written previous screenplays, including the synthetic *Heartbreak Ridge* (1986) for Clint Eastwood; Nasatir was a producer of that glossy *angst*-travelogue *The Big Chill* (1983). Out of these dim antecedents came this unsparing film. The writer and the producer made another leap by selecting the English director John Irvin, who had done the reticent, taut BBC serial *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1979) and the lapidary *Turtle Diary* (1985). Irvin had long ago made some documentaries about war, including one about Vietnam, but little in his past indicated that he was the man for this job—which he certainly proved to be.

“Hamburger Hill,” a nickname that needs no explanation, is a mountain near the Laotian border that U.S. forces took from the North Vietnamese after eleven assaults between the 10th and the 20th of May 1969. Carabatsos concentrated on one squad, fourteen men, of the 101st Airborne Division, who were in the worst of the fighting. Their company suffered 70% casualties. (One of war’s recurrent grisly jokes: a month later the Vietnamese reoccupied the hill.) To build a war film of large intent on one contained episode is not a fresh idea; for instance, two films about the Korean War, *Men in War* (1957) and *Pork Chop Hill* (1959), were about a battle for a hill. But *Hamburger Hill* began with a difference—a difference even from *Platoon*: the filmmakers insisted on using virtually unknown actors. This is certainly not to say that the recognition factor always hurts an ultra-realistic film; I can’t begin to cite examples that prove otherwise. But in this case the virtual anonymity of the cast is a benefit. It underscores the anonymity of soldiers everywhere—the anonymity that their commanders want for them and that the wash of history over armies finally achieves.

The film begins—after we hear some voices on field radios—with a slow pan of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, that awesome stone roster, each name known to a few, all the names woven into one long heartache. Through the monument, the film fades into close-ups of men in battle, thus telling us from the start that behind the marble are tens of thousands of individual young human beings. Who were killed.

Hamburger Hill particularizes a few of those young men. They are not especially interesting in themselves; the film would be betrayed if they were. Their ordinarieness is their importance. They exemplify Randall Jarrell's line about the ball-turret gunner (from a 1945 poem): "From my mother's sleep I fell into the State," and this is what the State has done with them.

Some early sequences take place to the rear of battle, though never far from surprise attack. We see Vietnamese peasants trying to continue their lives right in the midst of war. We become acquainted with the squad, in camp and at a brothel. (There are flare-ups between the few blacks and the whites in the squad before and after their return to the front.) But most of the film is about the assaults on the hill and the lulls in between; most of it makes hell look like a Rest and Recreation Area. (It was filmed in the Philippines.) Awful details are not skimmed: intestines are ripped out, a head is blown off—toward the end, a missing arm almost seems mild. I suppose that those who flock to horror films will avoid *Hamburger Hill*. Horror films contain a kind of reality, too, but not one that entails responsibility.

The closest point of comparison for this film is of course *Platoon*, and, much as they resemble each other, there is a distinct difference. The prime purpose of *Platoon* is to explore the effect of combat on a combatant's morality: how long a man can remain recognizable to himself in the midst of intensities that shatter most of what has previously guided his life. The point of *Hamburger Hill* is concentratedly mimetic: simply to put us there, to drench us in the sight and sound (markedly the sound); to make at least a few of us feel some responsibility for their being there.

This leads to the matter of attitudes back home at the time, which were also part of *The Hanoi Hilton* (1987). Here the matter is handled quite differently. These men are shocked by what they know of the lunatic fringe of the peace movement, by a remark—about the futility of the assaults—credited to Senator Kennedy (given without context). But unlike *The Hanoi Hilton*, that's where the matter stops. No attempt is made to wipe out the fact that most of the peace movement was trying to get these men out of the deathtrap they were in, out of a pointless and immorally instituted war. And of course this new film brings *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) to mind, too. It further discredits Kubrick's work as stylistic toying with destruction.

Hamburger Hill is so excellently directed, so generally well written and acted that I'm all the more obliged to note a few lapses. In an acute review of *Platoon*

(*Dissent*, Summer 1987), William Adams pointed out that Stone's film, for all its realism, "is nonetheless a piece of fiction ... guided by a series of ... non-realistic literary and cinematic conventions." The new film is much more doggedly realistic. It makes no reference to Ahab; it contains no "rite of passage" through which, Adams says, "*Platoon*, ironically, continues to inform us of the romantic possibilities of war." But there are moments when the cinematic methods of *Hamburger Hill* come to the fore and, briefly, distract us. Occasionally the camera shakes when there's an explosion nearby. Irvin uses this footage presumably to emphasize the shock; to me, it's an intervention of the camera's presence. Once in a while Carabatsos's good dialogue moves—in an almost visible way—toward the shape of a Scene, sometimes with a closing reminiscent monologue; and at the end of these Scenes, Irvin tracks the camera in slowly on the speaker with a touch of filmic self-consciousness. A few of the soldiers, a small part of the time, dissolve into actors. The dramatic music—by Philip Glass—under the last assault ought to have been omitted.

But Glass's opening music is stringent and grim. The rock number as the helicopters land the squad near the base of the hill is shattering. Peter MacDonald's cinematography could hardly be bettered. Two of the actors are especially fine: Dylan McDermott as a young but seasoned sergeant, Tim Quill as a relative newcomer.

After the death of one of the squad, the sergeant says, "He died for the squad, not for God or for country or even the 101st Airborne," and by then we are so enclosed in this small cosmos that we believe it—especially when they go up the hill again and the sergeant says, "You don't have to like it, you just have to show up." One phrase runs through the film like a litany: "Don't mean nothin'." The men intone it after a fight between two of them, after members of the squad are killed in combat: they repeat it and repeat it—it's the only dope in the picture. Out of what they are doing and enduring, the only sense they can make is non-sense.

***Wall Street*, Oliver Stone, 1987** (*The New Republic*, 4 & 11 January 1988)

The trouble with *Wall Street* (1987) is that it aces its subject squarely. In two senses. First, the film confronts complex material and stamps it with a die. Some of the complexities are caught within the pattern, but it's a familiar pattern just the same. A young hustler rises, falls, and learns a lesson therefrom. The director, Oliver Stone, who wrote the script with Stanley Weiser, used a similar pattern in *Platoon* (1986), but the point of that commanding film was its texture. In fact the texture turns out to be the best part of *Wall Street* too, but its impact is not,

could not be, comparable. Here the tragedies are less immediately visible: the action has to make them visible. But the action in Stone's new picture, for all the dexterous direction and satiric reproduction of ultramod behavior, is 1930s Warner Brothers morality drama.

That is one squareness, the shape. Another is the angle of approach. Stone's idea of dealing with Wall Street is simply to deal with Wall Street—head-on. In the best film I know about a stockbroker, Antonioni's *Eclipse* (1962), the emphasis is on the man, not the market. Antonioni gave us plenty of the bustle—at least as it was in Rome twenty-five years ago—but his real interest was the man within the broker, what made him a broker and how his occupation affected his being. Stone's focus is the market—vivid, veristic re-creation of the market. He shows us a good deal of the protagonist's life after business hours, but all the other stuff is décor, like his new clothes. Stone's main effort at “outsideness” is to give the man a blue-collar father to symbolize the rectitude from which the son has strayed—which makes the film as sentimental about blue-collar workers as it is formulaic about the spiritual price of success. Stone's film lacks any fresh angle of insight.

Still, it has excitement right from the start. As the sun rises over New York (yes, another Manhattan story that opens with shots of skyscrapers), as the hordes flow through the streets and onto the escalators, as Frank Sinatra sings “Fly Me to the Moon” on the soundtrack, battle begins. In *King John* (1596), Shakespeare speaks of the English army as “rash, inconsiderate, fiery voluntaries” who have landed in France “to make a hazard of new fortunes here.” So in *Wall Street*: fiery voluntaries are off to hazard new fortunes in these computerized, neon-lighted beehives. Stone bears down tightly on the swarming and yelling and head-clutching and exultation, on the hitches of the lowly and the suites of the mighty, on the floor of the Exchange. The editing is like machete strokes, clearing a way through the jungle for the advancing camera. Lesser than *Platoon* though the texture must be, nonetheless it's the strongest element in *Wall Street*. The dynamics are in its rhythms and context more than its personified drama. Stone reminds us that the gold standard is gone only technically: these people would make Nibelungs look serene.

But there is the story—and the leading actor. Charlie Sheen was the protagonist of *Platoon* and did well enough as a humanized charade figure, the innocent who descends into the slough and comes out desperate for innocence again. In *Wall Street*, however, Sheen is meant to be a driven, driving figure, a comer who impresses people, especially a legendary wheeler-dealer. Sheen has all the verve and displays all the lineaments of desire of a supermarket manager.

Others in the cast are better. Sheen's real father, Martin Sheen, plays his screen father, a foreman in aircraft maintenance, with union-dues hardheadedness. Daryl Hannah wears odd, expensive hats well as an interior designer who is young Sheen's Significant Other while he is thought to be significant. James

Spader has dewy duplicity as a young lawyer who succumbs to insider temptations. Hal Holbrook does his folksy best with the thankless role of the old hand in the brokerage house who looks askance at newfangled doings, as if, before computers, brokerages consisted of old codgers sitting around a coal stove whittling, spitting tobacco juice and homilies.

The real leading role—in the sense that he leads Sheen on as example and tempter—is played by Michael Douglas, a character drawn from those notorious monsters of finance whose ethics are congruent with their egos. Douglas is becoming a figure to reckon with among American film actors, but the reckoning is not all favorable. He was funny and bright in *Romancing the Stone* (1984), dramatically conventional in *Fatal Attraction* (1987). Here he plays the 1980s Mephistopheles with everything the role needs except the assurance that he is overpoweringly in control of it. A younger Robert Duvall or George C. Scott—even a younger Kirk Douglas!—would have acted the role in a way that turned it inside out for us. With Michael Douglas, I felt that he was just about keeping up with the part's demands. It's almost as if he were *presenting* the role for a stronger person to see and take over, like a model presenting a garment for someone else really to wear.

This is certainly not to say that Douglas is ineffectual, only that he and the part are no more than evenly matched. In fact he does quite well with my favorite moment in the script, when he is alone on the beach at dawn outside his Long Island home, speaking on his cordless phone to Sheen. The scene has a touch of Gatsby floating in his swimming pool at the end of his story.

But for all its knowingness, the script has crudities. We're not clear as to who it is that reveals Douglas's real intent toward the airline he wants to buy: How did the tipster know and why did he spill it? Amid all the hip banter and thrust comes a line like Sheen's at his sick father's bedside, "I never told you, but I always loved you, Dad." It's hard to believe that Douglas would fall for the trick that finally undoes him. And when the break comes between him and Sheen, the older man says, "I look at you, I see myself. You could have been one of the great ones." (Besides the triteness, it's not believable about Sheen.)

But the worst line is the last line. Sheen *père* is taking his son to the place where he will face the consequences of misconduct. In the car, Pa says that maybe all this will be good for the young man. Perhaps from now on he will "create, instead of living by the buying and selling of others." What twaddle—a distorting sentimentality about the economic structure of every society, capitalist or otherwise. It's understandable, in character terms, that a father who is a skilled craftsman might prefer a life for his son other than marketing and merchandising, but the position of the line, italicized as the film's last utterance, makes it the moral of the whole story. Thus it confirms that, for all the electric energy and hipness of the film, it is only one more Hollywood piety, dolled up in designer dress, a sheep in wolf's clothing.

But I learned—I think I learned—one thing from *Wall Street*. Every new expensive yuppie restaurant in New York is so noisy that couples sitting next to each other have to shout. Restaurant managers tell me that their patrons want it that way, and the waiting lines confirm this. The Wall Streeters among those patrons apparently spend their working days in the midst of comparable noise and not only don't mind it in the evening, they want it. By welcoming the noise, they prove that they're at least used to the boom of boom and bust.

Matewan, John Sayles, 1987 (*The New Republic*,
7 September 1987)

"The first person who changes the script from an abstraction to acetate is the cameraman," said Haskell Wexler, one of the best of cameramen. John Sayles is lucky that Wexler is the cameraman who "changed" his script for *Matewan* (1987) because the look of the film is its strongest feature. The story, based on fact, is about bloody labor strife in a West Virginia coal-mining town called Matewan in 1920. Wexler makes the story doubly affecting: to the harsh facts, he adds poignancy of setting. The film was shot in a town not far from the present-day Matewan, a town stripped down and dressed up by the designer, Nora Chavooshian, to put it in period. Wexler has made the town and the countryside look idyllic.

The end of American innocence is a perennial subject. (Oscar Wilde said that youth is America's oldest tradition.) By 1920, after a world war, American innocence was getting a bit long in the tooth. The idea of a union, of a union organizer, was no longer a startling breach in the old order. Still, the arrival of the "modern," symbolized by a union organizer who brings both benefits and changes, is seen by Wexler as harsh necessity arriving to alter old ways, even the old look of things. The town had much misery and needed change, but Wexler's eye sees that change never comes without cost. Some of the shots, like one of a dirt road leading steeply up a wooded hill from the railroad tracks, are softly nostalgic even as we realize that nostalgia is a snare.

Sayles of course had much to do with all this: first he scouted locations, then he selected Wexler and conferred with him continually about the visual tone. (Sayles tells of the experience of making *Matewan* in a book forthcoming this year from Houghton Mifflin called *Thinking in Pictures*, which includes the shooting script.) But his screenplay needed all the "changes" that Wexler gave it. Sayles chose the most accessible, almost facile shape for his material: the coming of a union organizer to help the oppressed miners; his trouble in persuading the people who need his help to accept it; the battles with scabs; the falterings; the climactic showdown. This is not categorically a bad shape: it is also the shape of a masterwork, Mario

Monicelli's *The Organizer* (1963). The chief difference between the two films is in richness of character—in writing and in acting. Also, Sayles loads his film with pat contrivances (word arrives just in time to save a supposed defector from execution) and some sorry blotches of sentimentality.

Most of the actors get little more to do throughout their roles than they give us in their first minutes. They establish a few qualities, then keep supplying them: the staunch but pacific organizer, the taciturn widow who runs the boardinghouse, the stalwart police chief, the two thugs hired by the coal company. In his book Sayles recounts how he tried to deepen the characters and even reproduces a page of notes he gave one of the thugs. Still, the thug comes out with less finesse than the Jack Palance character in *Shane* (1953).

Some of the script is peculiar. A huge black man, played by James Earl Jones, rides into town with other blacks in a trainload of scabs, who are attacked by striking miners; he later appears at a union meeting, resents being called a scab, and says he has never been one. Why else was he brought to Matewan? Some Italian immigrants are also brought in as scabs. Why do both the blacks and the Italians become union supporters? No adequate reason is given. Brotherhood is more contrived than convincing: when an Italian is playing a homeland tune on his mandolin, he is joined by a native fiddler and a harmonica player. (There's also an unlikely glimpse of the principal Italian, shown to be devoutly Catholic, attending a Baptist service.)

The cast is generally adequate without being impressive. The most powerful actor, Jones, is the most oddly cast. He is monstrously fat. How did a hard-pressed miner get that fat? And into what mine shaft would he fit? Another odd piece of casting is Josh Mostel as the mayor of Matewan. Mostel, who comes on like an affable Bronx delicatessen owner, is a bit hard to believe as the mayor of a West Virginia mining town in 1920. The most telling character that Sayles has written is the boardinghouse keeper's fourteen-year-old son—movingly played by Will Oldham—who is already at work in the mines and who has the gift of preaching, which he shows in the Baptist church. The adult that boy eventually became is given a few voice-over reminiscences, to lend rue to the story and to fill in some subsequent facts—a device that John Ford and Philip Dunne used in an earlier coal-mining film, *How Green Was My Valley* (1941).

The ambition to make a film about labor history is admirable because this country is historically amnesiac, and nowhere more so than in the grim field of union struggles. (Try asking a twenty-five-year-old who John L. Lewis and Walter Reuther were, to go no further back.) Films like *Matewan* remind us that most of labor's rights and privileges casually expected today were bought with dreadful suffering. But Sayles's film, though quite easily his best, lacks anything like the grip of Monicelli's. What I'll mainly remember is Wexler's use of lamplight in nighttime

interiors, of silver-green hues in nighttime exteriors, of the lovely early morning light in which the last terrible battle is fought.

***Salaam Bombay!*, Mira Nair, 1988** (*The New Republic*, 14 November 1988)

Street children have been a world film subject at least since World War II and De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1946). Lately Rio de Janeiro and Seattle have joined the all-too-expandable list of locations. Now it's Bombay. The peculiar difficulty for a new film on the subject, however, is in finding a fresh approach, not to titillate soft-seated customers but to disentangle the material from filmic clichés. Mira Nair has succeeded fairly well.

She is an Indian woman in her early thirties, educated at Harvard, and her film is called *Salaam Bombay!* Previously Nair has made documentaries, which she likes (she said at a recent press conference) because they explore the "inexplicability" of life. *Salaam Bombay!* is fiction. Presumably she doesn't think the lives of street children more explicable than other lives but wanted a more malleable form for this subject.

Her protagonist is a ten-year-old boy, played by Shafiq Sayed, who has gone from a village to Bombay to make money. He works at jobs as he can find them, including the delivery of tea to a brothel. Drug dealings cross his path. He has some moral sense in the midst of a disordered world, some urge to compassion and honesty, the origins of which are not quite clear. Prison comes his way, then escape, then the implication of a desolate future.

The cast mixes professionals and non-professionals. Most of the latter are children who attended an acting workshop with Nair and her collaborators for some months before shooting began. Shafiq Sayed is unaffected and direct. With his beautiful face, he *is* the film—the film's tragedy—more than anything done in the film. All the actors are good, even the professionals. But Nair has paid a tax for moving over into fiction. She and her co-writer, Sooni Taraporevala, have supplied too much story, too many skeins of which are predictable. This is certainly not to say they are unbelievable, only that no way has been found to refresh their familiarity.

As director, Nair had to shoot footage for editing into fiction, instead of documentary footage in which a film could be "found." Sometimes she has not shot enough: some transitions are jagged. Sometimes she has worked hurriedly, as in the sequences where she tries to make use of a street festival for her story.

Contradictorily, she has let the film run on for a while after it is substantively finished. *Salaam Bombay!* is an utterly sincere piece of work, on a subject whose

urgency needs no comment, but it's somewhat burdened with cinematics that hobble its very sincerity.

***Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, Pedro Almodóvar, 1988** (*The New Republic*, 12 December 1988)

The publicity bells are pealing for Pedro Almodóvar, ringing out the news that his latest film will be his breakthrough in America. This pealing is a pity. Almodóvar deserves to break through, as far as a foreign filmmaker can, but this is not his best film to be shown here, and if it doesn't win him an audience, the publicity may backfire. His better films—in the past and, very possibly, the future—will have a tougher time.

All his screenplays (he writes his own) have had a mordant tone, and all his directing has shown a keen sense of the visual. It's strange, however, that when he concentrates strenuously on visual virtuosity, the level of his screenplays drops. *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), directed with sufficient confidence, had a wittily organized, tart script. The two that followed, *Dark Habits* (1983) and *Matador* (1986), had much more cinematic flourish and much more problematic scripts. His latest, a farce called *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), has his most pyrotechnical direction and his weakest screenplay to date.

The contrast goes further. This director who insists on giving his filmmaking cinematic high polish has here done his least cinematic writing. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* is quintessentially a one-set play that has been opened up for filming. Plenty of scenes take place elsewhere, and there's an auto chase to the airport near the end, but the picture's home is the heroine's apartment; with skillful adaptation, it could—if one wanted—be kept there.

Again the place is Madrid, again the leading woman is Carmen Maura, an Almodóvar veteran. She plays a TV actress who also does commercials and who has just lost her married lover. Her attempts to speak to him before he scoots off to Stockholm with another woman; the intrusion into her apartment of a girlfriend hiding from the police; the arrival of her ex-lover's son and his fiancée, who have come to see about renting Maura's apartment; jokes with an answering machine, with telephones thrown through windows, with bumbling detectives, with gazpacho heavily laced with sleeping pills—these are some of the ingredients of this fast-moving farce. But we merely watch it whizzing around trying to amuse us.

Almodóvar has a serious flaw for a man who wants to make us laugh, especially at social satire. He is so far only an accountant of comedy: that is, he enters items in a ledger (his script) and can prove that they ought to add up to laughs.

He seems sealed off from communication, self-satisfied with his humor. The Marx Brothers used to take their material on tour to test it before they filmed it; maybe Almodóvar should copy.

As a director, he's a bit of a showoff but is briskly inventive. He uses the colors of cheap ads—Sunday supplement colors—for the homes and clothes of people who lead Sunday-supplement lives. His editing and pacing are impatient. He jogs us continually with unusual camera angles—for instance, a shot through a pair of eyeglasses that have fallen on the floor. He casts *à la* Fellini, using a gallery of faces more than an ensemble of actors. In Maura, who somewhat resembles Irene Papas, he has a genuine actress of range and strength. Here she rides the waves of the ridiculous like a serious woman who knows how to surf. But the waves are sluggish.

High Hopes, Mike Leigh, 1988 (*The New Republic*, 13 March 1989)

A specter is haunting much of the Western world—the post-revolutionary who never had a revolution. Through the 1960s and early 1970s many young people in Europe and the Americas, sickened by the ills of the society around them, believed that radical change must be at hand. That change didn't occur, and they have been left stranded. It's not a question of hope deferred, the revolution postponed: hope for the revolution has dimmed. They are embittered veterans of a war that was never really fought and does not loom.

Further, those now middling-aged people are sometimes joined by younger ones who were children or were unborn in the “revolutionary” days but, equally sickened with much of what they see around them, fall in with the veterans' brigade. The younger ones are disinherited without even having had the chance of a legacy.

Film has been dealing with the post-revolutionary for at least fifteen years. The first instance I remember is Blier's *Going Places*, the 1974 French film in which two young men vented their frustrated revolutionary zeal in social anarchism. The latest is the English film *High Hopes*, written and directed by Mike Leigh, who has been especially active in theater and television. His principal characters are two lovers, Cyril and Shirley. Cyril, bearded and wise and thirty-five, is a motorcycle messenger in London though he's obviously capable of much more demanding work. A radical, he wants only to keep himself as aloof as he can from the Thatcherite nation around him, to make a living with minimum commitment to a world he despises. Shirley, who is about his age and shares his life, holds the same views but is less adamant about non-participation: she wants a child. Cyril doesn't.

Around this pair, whom Leigh treats with affection and discernment, are relatives, a few neighbors, a friend. Each of them is somehow related to the central theme of post-revolution; in fact, the film's chief flaw is that those relations are sometimes overstressed. Cyril's mother is a working-class woman, now bent and senile, who forgets things in the present and who presumably symbolizes the working class's amnesia about its past and future. Cyril's sister is a feverishly acquisitive bourgeoisie, and her husband, a rising hamburger king, is more smugly acquisitive. Ma's posh neighbors, a wine merchant and wife who have renovated an old house in a run-down street, are feverish in their own way, striving to replicate what they perceive to be high style in manners and behavior.

Except for Ma, Leigh dislikes these other characters—somewhat too obviously. From time to time they leave life to become cartoons. But what saves the film then and what strengthens it throughout is its form. Leigh rejects traditional narrative structure in favor of an exploratory, almost casual method that moves in spurts of interest. Since, by and large, we share those interests, we follow the film through an aggregate of social moments, more than dramatic scenes. The intelligent daring of this method reassures us when the content gets overly broad: we're more patient than we might be otherwise.

The film begins—we discover—untraditionally. A young bumpkin, laden with bags, arrives in London and tries to find his sister's flat. Lost, he asks help of a man he happens to pass, a man repairing his motorcycle. The cyclist is touched by his helplessness and asks him in for tea. Up to this point the film seems to be the bumpkin's story; but the cyclist is Cyril, and his companion who makes the tea is Shirley. Although the bumpkin stays the night—two nights—he finally passes out of the story and leaves us with its true center. This deliberate tease of tradition, deceiving us about the protagonist, shoehorning in the film's real concerns, is witty—and it's helpful. The simplicity and openness of Cyril and Shirley are established before they come center stage.

So, bolstered by Leigh's audacity, we can tolerate the laid-on uppishness of Ma's neighbors, the giggling consumeritis of Cyril's sister. And Leigh's symbolic gestures often pay off. Cyril and Shirley visit Marx's grave in Highgate Cemetery and read the inscription telling us that philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to change it. When they leave, they run into a friend of theirs, a radical woman who invites them in for tea. Obviously strung out on some drug, the woman rattles on about revolutionary meetings she attends and how she enjoys the talk—not much action, just talk. Cyril and Shirley have just come from Marx's grave, literally and in some other ways, and here they are with a woman who is high on two stimulants, one of which is Marxian talk.

Rather than a cumulative traditional structure, Leigh uses a few organizing principles around which his inquiries cluster: a sequence in which Ma forgetfully

locks herself out of her house and asks her posh neighbors for help; a visit to each of the three principal couples at bedtime; a surprise seventieth birthday party for Ma. The smell of each of the homes we enter is in our nostrils; Leigh knows them past the details of décor. The best scenes, the pivotal scenes really, are long ones between Cyril and Shirley, private, warm, funny, basically grim. (Leigh believes in improvisation, but how much of these and other scenes were improvised it's impossible to tell.)

All the actors are good, though Heather Tobias, as Cyril's sister, has a near-impossible job. Her giggling frenzies are based on some observations of Leigh's or hers that simply don't resolve into a character, even a satirical one. Philip Davis is exactly right as Cyril, appealing without any hint of trying for it, a quiet human being resigned to mere cheerfulness. Edna Doré is granitic as old Ma, lost but unafraid. Leigh uses her face tellingly in close-ups while people buzz around her.

An epitome of the film is the casting of Shirley. Ruth Sheen's upper front teeth protrude like a small amphitheater. That is plain fact. When we first see her, so sorry is our conditioning in stereotypes, we assume she must be a figure of fun, some sort of simp. But quickly it becomes clear that she is a serious, major character, one of a pair of lovers, and quite soon, particularly because of the tender scenes between her and Davis, her face becomes the only face for the gentle and humane woman she is. Leigh's choice of Sheen is typical of his approach to narrative and to filmmaking: he wants to jolt our preconceptions.

How does *High Hopes* end? Pretty much as it began. No climax, no substantive change, no extricable point. We have simply journeyed along the way in some people's lives. Cyril and Shirley are merely keeping on, trying to live decently even if resignedly, even if the title of their film is now only wry.

***Chocolat*, Claire Denis, 1988** (*The New Republic*, 17 April 1989)

Memory is treated conventionally in *Chocolat* (1988) but it's a poetic convention. Most of this French film is, technically, a flashback; more precisely, it's a film set in the past with a beginning and end in the present. A young woman today remembers a time in her childhood, after which we return to the young woman. The major portion of the film uses the convention that the child in the past sees the world around her like an artist. The past is treated not as a storehouse of fact, but as a terrain of sensibility. Since the film is avowedly autobiographical, the filmmaker depicts herself as she is today and views her childhood as if she were then the woman that she is now.

Claire Denis, the filmmaker, was brought up in Africa, where her father was a French colonial official. At the age of fourteen she moved to France and in time

went to film school. After graduation in 1971 she worked her way up to become an assistant to Costa-Gavras, then to Wim Wenders, who had some influence on her, then to Jim Jarmusch, who influenced her even more, I'd say. After a return visit to Africa, Denis decided to make this film, which Wenders helped her to produce. She wrote the screenplay with Jean-Paul Fargeau and did her own directing. In one respect, though one only, *Chocolat* reminds me of *Sugar Cane Alley* (1983), another lovely essay in reminiscence by a young woman who grew up in a French territory and was educated at a Paris film school, Euzhan Palcy.

The place is Cameroon. On the sand facing the sea sits a young white woman (played by Mireille Perrier), glancing at a notebook that, as we learn, belonged to her father. She watches a black man and his young son bathe. She leaves and starts down a road. By this time, through this brief simple start, we know we are in the hands of a director with purposeful control. The air is interestingly quiet: the pace tranquil but not slow; the editing seems to begin a mosaic. All of these elements, rather than what happens, make us wonder about what *will* happen.

Soon we move back in time to her childhood. She is about nine or ten (played by Cécile Ducasse), living with her parents on a government station far out in the wilds. Her mother (Giulia Boschi) is lovely; her father the commandant (François Cluzet, who resembles Dustin Hoffman) is devoted but busy. The child spends much of her time with the black house "boy," Protée (Isaach de Bankolé, an imposing ebony sculpture). Denis establishes quickly that the dominant element in the atmosphere here, despite the official activities, the raising and lowering of the flag with the tiny garrison, the various visitors, is the quiet that we heard in the opening sequence. All of these lives, masters and servants, are wrapped in comfortable quiet. The German builder of the commandant's residence (the colony was German until 1916; there is a German cemetery nearby) put a small sign on a porch post that translates, "This is the last house on earth."

The quiet forebodes. The presence of the beautiful young black man in the house bodes more, though he is utterly respectful and though the mother treats him quite offhandedly, even when she asks him to lace up her dress in the back. (The convention that Denis is using allows her to show things that the child could not have seen and would not have understood in any case.)

The tension is diverted for a time by the forced landing of a small plane nearby. The pilot, co-pilot, and four passengers must stay in the house for a few months until a spare part arrives. They leave, and then comes the climax of the tension. It consists of a touch on the leg. One evening the mother is sitting on the floor by the French windows. Protée comes to close the windows for the night, and she touches his leg. He doesn't respond. Next day she asks her husband to transfer Protée out of the house to other work. Protée gets his revenge—for the punishment of his loyalty—with an incident in which the child's hand is burned on the palm.

Back in the present, we see the young woman's palm, still white from the burn. We see in little the great changes in Cameroon. She goes to the airport to depart, and there, instead of the dinky plane of the past, awaits a giant jet marked Cameroon Airlines. The film closes with three black airport workers, three men laughing and lounging together. One of them, always kept in long shot, is de Bankolé—not necessarily as Protée, just the same actor, the same presence—now lounging and free, unlike the constrained, servile houseboy.

Denis's eye for composition is serious, refined. Like Jarmusch, she uses emptiness for emphasis. She uses people, walls, doors, and household objects in arrangements that seem to speak of what is not being said. This is particularly poignant in a society separated into two strata that do not communicate wholly with each other.

The performances in the four principal roles are helpful, with the child soberly inquisitive and de Bankolé innately powerful. Some of the lesser roles, a visiting Englishman and a vulgar passenger on the downed plane, seem to have been filled by friends of the project who just wanted to join in.

***Little Vera*, Vasily Pichul, 1988** (*The New Republic*, 1 May 1989)

Much has been made of the explicit sex scene in *Little Vera* (1988). Well, it's not all that explicit, but it's in a Soviet film and therefore notable. Also, much has been made in the current *Playboy* of the leading woman, Natalya Negoda, although there, too, nudity is not complete. The nuisance in all this bother is that it distracts from the major points: *Little Vera* is a good film, and it's frank about something more surprising in a Soviet film than sex—youthful malaise.

Vera is eighteen, daughter of a truck driver and a shop foreman, who lives with her parents in Zhdanov, a seaport in the south. She is waiting around for a notice of college admission, about which she cares little, and is being pursued by a young man, Andrei, about whom she cares less. The narrative is slim, but it doesn't need much more body because it supplies what's needed, a ground for moving—burrowing—into Vera's life: her drifting, her constant quarrels with her parents, her use of coeval friends as refuge from her parents, her meeting with a new and handsome young man who overwhelms her.

If all this sounds familiar, that's precisely why it's surprising in a Soviet film. The only elements in the story that could not easily be transposed to America are the fact that the new young man, Sergei, moves into the apartment of Vera's family—into her bedroom—before marriage and that a quarrel with her father, in which Sergei is stabbed, delays but does not cancel the marriage. The

rest—the breach between generations in which we understand both sides—is grimly recognizable.

The film's blend of "American" and "European" elements continues throughout. The food, the Gorkian closeness of the small apartment, the habitual drunkenness of the father (which is almost matched by his daughter), the physical slammings: all of these suggest Eastern Europe. But on the family dining table is a bottle of Beefeater gin. On Vera's wall is a photo of Meryl Streep and Roy Scheider. The music she likes is American. The MTV in her hangout is in English.

The candor about these details—including a mention of AIDS—is as striking as the candor about the theme of youthful disaffection. The sole mention of Soviet ideals comes when Vera murmurs to Sergei, "We have a common goal, Communism." At that moment she is clad in a bikini and is wriggling across his body on a beach. (And what a beach. Dirty, littered with metal scrap.)

This is a first feature film, written by Maria Khmelik and directed by Vasily Pichul, who is only some ten years older than Vera, who was born in Zhdanov, and who grew up in an apartment much like the one we see. He went to the Moscow Film School for six years, then worked in television and made some shorts. (He is currently making another film with Negoda.) How fortunate—for him and us—that Pichul's filmic coming-of-age coincides with the arrival of *glasnost*, so that he could deal openly with what was evidently uppermost in his mind. We can't assume that all Soviet youth is like Sergei and Vera, but those two are certainly credible to Russians. *Little Vera* has been a smash in the U.S.S.R.—50 million tickets sold in the first three months, we're told—and it can't all be attributed to a few bosom shots.

Would *Little Vera* be interesting if it were set elsewhere—somewhere in the West? Less, surely. Still, it would be affecting. Pichul is skillful and sympathetic, and he knows how to mesh environment with theme. His use of the cramped apartment is the most deftly managed confinement since Godard went into Jean Seberg's hotel room in *Breathless* (1960). The graceless city and, especially, that beach are used trenchantly but without emphasis. (However, Soviet color photography is still many versts behind the West.)

And Pichul chose good actors, whom he directed well. Negoda is no mere sex bomb. She understands Vera completely and plays her from a secret center of desolation, which comes out as aggression and languor. Andrei Sokolov, as Sergei, has just the right tone of offhand truth-telling. Lyudmila Zaitseva and Yuri Nazarov, as Vera's parents, give renewed life to those recurrent characters, the father and mother baffled by their child and by changing standards. These characters are, in fact, not a twentieth-century invention. At the tragic end of Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena* (1844), the heroine's bewildered father says, "I don't understand the world anymore." Many times in this film, Vera's father could have said the same thing.

***Cinema Paradiso*, Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988**

(*The New Republic*, 19 February 1990)

Cinema Paradiso (1988) is openly an homage to Federico Fellini. So openly that any of us who love *I Vitelloni* (1953) and *Amarcord* (1973) will be glad that the obeisance was made—especially since it was done with such flavor and deftness. (It even has two Fellini actors. Leopoldo Trieste, who was the aspiring playwright in *I Vitelloni*, here plays an aging priest; Pupella Maggio, who was the teenager’s mother in *Amarcord*, here plays the protagonist’s mother in her later years.)

The director was Giuseppe Tornatore—it’s his second film—who grew up in the Sicilian village where some of *Cinema Paradiso* was made and who presumably became filmstruck at a theater like the one in the title. How much of the story is strictly autobiographical doesn’t matter. Tornatore, who wrote the screenplay, presumably used his past both for fact and for imaginative stimulus.

A small boy—enslavingly played by an imp named Salvatore Cascio—hangs around the theater so much that he becomes plague-and-pal of the projectionist, Philippe Noiret (dubbed in Sicilian). The film’s framework is the death and funeral of Noiret. The hero, now a successful filmmaker in Rome, hears of his friend’s death at the beginning, goes home for the funeral at the end. Between, we see his life.

None of the film is especially surprising. All of it is agreeably familiar: communal feelings—pro and con—in the town; town “characters”; horseplay in the film theater; adolescent love (the teenager is played by Marco Leonardi, the grown man by Jacques Perrin—neither as appealing as the boy); the projectionist urging the youth to get out of this town lest he become one of the “characters” himself.

Noiret mimes his part very well, but, with all respect to his talent, I kept wondering whether there isn’t an Italian actor—no, a Sicilian one—who could have done the role. This way, we’re conscious every moment that two people are playing the part.

Tornatore has learned much from Fellini—especially in the long shots where someone suddenly appears close up. Let’s hope he moves on to his own style. Meanwhile, he has given us a nice bask in Sicilian warmth.

***Ariel*, Aki Kaurismäki, 1988** (*The New Republic*,

20 & 27 August 1990)

Winter. We are in northern Finland, which looks like a caricature of northern Sweden. Snow and leaden sky. Mining country. In a small cheerless tavern, a

middle-aged miner and a younger one are having a drink. The older man says he has had it with life, advises the younger one to get out before it's too late, and gives him the keys to his car. Then the older man goes to the men's room door, pulls out a pistol, loads the chamber, and goes inside. The young man sees all this and does nothing about it. He smokes and sips his drink.

Soon a shot is heard. In a moment—in a moment—the young man goes inside to investigate. He sees the body on the floor and leaves. He goes to the shed where the older man kept his car, a Cadillac convertible, and backs it out. As soon as the car is out, the shed collapses.

Thus the tone is set early in *Ariel*, a Finnish film written and directed by Aki Kaurismäki. This is Kaurismäki's fifth feature, made in 1988. He is thirty-three and has made two more features since then; and those who know his other work (I don't) say that *Ariel* is a fair sample. It's detached, precise, mocking, laden with a string of little time bombs that go off just a half step behind as the film moves along, laying open the seemingly impassive story with a kind of dread absurdist humor. Life is pretty grim, says Kaurismäki, trying to conceal his amusement at the fact.

Keeping those two views in nice tension, Kaurismäki proceeds with complete confidence in his filmmaking and complete calm in his view of the world. He doesn't propagandize for his view of life; he doesn't expect you to agree. The essence of his belief is that he doesn't care if you agree or not—which sometimes, as in this case, is a strong argument. The adventures of his hero, played equanimously by Turo Pajala, are rather wild but are treated as if they were commonplace. Even if this hasn't happened to you, says the film, it certainly could happen.

Pajala withdraws his savings from the local bank and drives down to Helsinki in his inherited Cadillac. No sooner has he stopped in the city for a hamburger than two muggers spot the wad in his wallet, follow him to a lonely place, and bean him. When Pajala comes to, he accepts that this was just another incident along the way. He doesn't go to the police; he goes to a flophouse, and the next day he looks for a job.

Floating along like a cork on a stream, he meets a woman, Susanna Haavisto, who lives in a more orderly manner but has a comparable attitude. She has at least two jobs, traffic warden and hotel maid, in order to support her small son, but basically she is prepared for anything that happens, even the good things. The sequence in which Pajala and Haavisto meet, dine, go to bed (something like two railroad cars being shunted together in a freight yard), then comprehend next morning that they are serious about each other is better than credible: it comments on all the romantic versions of that sequence that we have seen.

One day Pajala accidentally spots one of the men who mugged him, chases the thief, knocks him down, takes his wallet, and is himself arrested for robbery. He is

sentenced—the courtroom looks more chilly than the frozen north—and goes to jail. His cellmate, played by Matti Pellonpää, is another Kaurismäki touch, a quiet bespectacled man with a droopy mustache who looks like a reticent schoolteacher and who is in for manslaughter. In his ruminative way he says that, if released, he would probably kill again. Eventually he and Pajala become friends, plot an escape, and with Haavisto's aid, bring it off.

Pellonpää has connections to help them—along with Haavisto and her boy—get out of the country. Those connections prove treacherous, but at the end, the lovers (now married) and the boy make it. Not until the very end do we learn what the title has to do with the film: it's the name of the ship that is to take them to freedom. So, in a sense, the film moves forward to its title. In the final sequence the escapees are in a small boat making their way across the harbor to the *Ariel* when we hear on the sound track “Over the Rainbow,” male voice and chorus, in Finnish. It's the one overtly satirical touch in the picture, and it might be a bit much except that—for us, at least—the sound of Finnish in “Over the Rainbow” changes it from blatancy to cool comedy.

Kaurismäki likes to end sequences with quick fades to black, much like Jim Jarmusch, so it's no surprise to learn that the two directors are friends. (Jarmusch plays a small role in one of Kaurismäki's subsequent films.) The directing of *Ariel* shows what can only be called patience with the story. For instance, a number of times Pajala goes into a room or a building and the camera simply waits outside a few moments for him to reappear, as if what goes on in the room is necessary but uninteresting and the story will pick up again at the right moment. This unflappable quality has a certain impudent charm.

Two questions. One, does everyone in Finland smoke as much as Pajala does in this film? He outfumes Jean-Paul Belmondo in *Breathless* (1960), the previous world champ. Two, do most Finns understand English? At one point we see a TV set showing a Bogart film in English, without subtitles.

***Yaaba*, Idrissa Ouédraogo, 1989** (*The New Republic*, 13 April 1989)

Yaaba (1989) is a simple film whose prime virtue is that it doesn't merchandise its simplicity. This is the second feature-length work by Idrissa Ouédraogo, a thirty-five-year-old native of Burkina Faso, and is set in a village not far from where he was born and brought up. There are no professional actors in the film, yet out of common understanding of these characters and their lives, Ouédraogo and his cast move us.

The principal people are a boy and a girl about twelve who are close friends. She becomes ill, and the boy enlists the aid of an old woman called Yaaba (grandmother in the regional language) to find someone who can cure her. Other events, such as a marriage and an extramarital affair, are threaded through.

These people, farmers mostly, live in shacks without floors, eat the plainest of food, and in general live as *National Geographic* has led us to expect of African villagers. Yet the real texture of the film is not in its story but in the richness of the people, who are as complex and various as villagers anywhere. The contrast between the way they live and their sophistication is healthily surprising. They have a grace, especially the women, that the director obviously loves, and he takes every chance to let us see their etiquette and bearing.

The ninety minutes we spend in this village, under an immense blue sky, beautifully rendered by the cinematographer Matthias Kalin, are enlightening—and are chastening of civilized superiorities.

***Mystery Train*, Jim Jarmusch, 1989** (*The New Republic*, 11 December 1989)

Jim Jarmusch's new film is called *Mystery Train* (1989), and like the first two of his released in the United States—*Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) and *Down by Law* (1986)—it's quintessentially on two themes: photography and film form. The new picture comes more quickly at that quintessence because the story elements seem transparent, less engaging in themselves.

As before, musicians figure in *Mystery Train*—not just on the soundtrack but by playing parts. As before, some of the characters are foreigners: here there are a young Japanese pair, a young Italian widow, and a cockney drifter. As before, they serve to magnify the strangeness of the familiar American landscape. Each of the nationalities has a separate story, set in the seamier parts of Memphis. Those three stories never really interweave: they merely pass through the same seedy Memphis hotel. A gunshot in one story is heard in the other two. The sound of a woman in sexual ecstasy in one story is heard in another. A young woman gets involved in one strand without knowing that her ex-boyfriend is in another.

The film is no mystical enterprise, implying a master hand that weaves a design. Jarmusch implies only that to follow your own road is to touch other roads, a fact usually unknown unless there happens to be a camera observing. The young Japanese pair—she twittery, he ultra-cool—have come to Memphis to see Graceland, Elvis Presley's home, and are resting overnight before they make the pilgrimage. The widow encounters delays in shipping her husband's coffin back to

Italy and has to wait overnight. The cockney and two other men are involved in an armed robbery and hole up temporarily at the hotel. At the end, all of them leave the hotel and Memphis.

These three narratives, not engrossing in themselves, serve as viewing points for American patterns, patterns formed largely by pop culture. The worship of Elvis brings the two teenagers all the way from Yokohama; to them Memphis is Elvis-land. The Italian widow, forced to stay the night, stops at a news shop for an American magazine and is burdened by the owner with a heap of them that she carries like a penance; she later encounters more Americana, including a visit in her room from Elvis's ghost. The cockney and friends seem to have modeled their behavior on a C-movie (not quite a B). Jarmusch is not a satirist; he doesn't caricature these patterns. He presents them as current powers, and he does it so dryly that we see them more clearly.

Again his pace is as slow as he dares; rather, it is we who think it's daring—he is simply pacing the film as he wants to. More Jarmusch hallmarks: he finishes sequences with an astringent quick fade to black (occasionally a slow fade, which seems almost decadent in this context). The cinematography itself—done by Robby Müller in color, instead of the black and white used in *Down by Law*—seems intent on emphasizing the frame as an agreed-upon fiction. Life doesn't end at the borders of a shot: the framing of a shot is just one way that the film form exercises control over us.

Jarmusch's actors, which is not quite the right term, reflect his attempts at transparency and candor. They do just enough to fulfill the requirements of the moment: not bad actors, they are just not trying to be "good." Masatoshi Nagase and Youki Kudoh as the Japanese boy and girl supply the needed colors; Nicoletta Braschi *is*, apparently, more or less the woman she is playing; and Joe Strummer is visible but no more, as the cockney. Only Screamin' Jay Hawkins, the singer who plays the night clerk of the hotel, is so brimming with personality himself that he can't help giving a performance.

Jarmusch has by now well established a style and a persona. Will that be all? Or, like Godard, who also quickly achieved a signature, will he move on to further risks? An admirer hopes so, hopes that he will want to use film for more than a chance to show film's truths and falsities.

***The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, & Her Lover*, Peter Greenaway, 1989** (*The New Republic*, 23 April 1990)

Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982) was an elegantly malevolent delight, so I was sorry to miss his two subsequent features, which were shown in

the United States only at festivals. Now comes *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, & Her Lover* (1989), and as the English say, I'm struck all of a heap. What is *this*? It has the same Greenaway voluptuous color, the same intricate compositions, the same ruthless sexuality, but this time they are all used in a charade that hovers between the pointless and the obvious.

The chief setting is a fantastically luxe modern restaurant, with a full-scale reproduction of a Frans Hals across the back wall—*The Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Militia of Haarlem* (1616–39), one of the so-called *Doelenstukken* with which Hals and his fellow Dutch Golden Age painters celebrated the Civic Guards of their day. The restaurant setting and the painting warn us that we are about to witness continuity and contrast: we are going to see some feasting, but the spirit of it will probably be quite different from Hals. In fact we've already been alerted: the very first shot is of large dogs—in portentous light and slow motion—tearing at meat outside the restaurant.

The principals in the story, such as it is, are a brute gangland chief, Michael Gambon, and his aloof wife, Helen Mirren, who dine in the restaurant every night surrounded by henchmen; and a scholarly looking gent, Alan Howard, who dines alone while reading books. The cook and owner, Richard Bohringer, is involved, but it's an auxiliary role. One evening, Mirren and Howard, who don't know each other, exchange glances. Then, while Gambon keeps feasting noisily with his pals, Mirren slips off to the immense and otherwise empty ladies' room to meet Howard. They go into a stall and execute amorous maneuvers with acrobatic finesse.

On succeeding evenings the lovers meet again in the ladies' room (never used by any other woman), then in a kitchen nook provided by Bohringer, where, as they flail away, they are surrounded by heaps of foodstuffs. All this while Gambon is carousing with his pals inside, too busy to notice his wife's prolonged absence. The gorging of food, the ravings of sex, the ladies' room, the ornate restaurant—we're not given much chance to miss the symbols (as against the delicacy of *The Draughtsman's Contract*). Eventually Gambon suspects his wife, and the film winds to a violent yet picturesque end in the bookshop that Howard owns. (He specializes in books on the French Revolution, as if we needed yet another symbol.)

"Picturesque" is the obligatory term. Greenaway's earlier film might have degenerated into the merely picturesque if he hadn't been burrowing into us with a bitter, cogent story. Here there is only a heavy yet superficial allegory about different kinds of sensuality, so the pictures merely hang there before us, one after another. Almost all of them are gorgeous. As the camera recurrently travels slowly from left to right or in reverse, through the cavernous kitchen to the grand dining room and back, it isolates beautiful panels: a scullery boy singing in a silvery soprano as people bustle behind him; chefs working like skillful mimes in a scenario of food preparation; attendants and passing personages—all bathed in the

luscious light of Sacha Vierny's camera. (He did many of Resnais's films and *Belle de Jour* [1967] for Buñuel.) Virtually every frame could be reproduced in a film journal and would look enticingly magnificent; but the magnificence gets more and more hollow as the film progresses.

The actors seem deluded. Why did they want these roles? Bohringer is an established figure in France, yet here he plays only a glorified stooge. Howard and Mirren (she was last seen here in *Pascali's Island* [1988]) are actors of high repute; why did they accept roles with frontal nudity and much simulated sex? The question is not censorious. A good actor does whatever a good part requires, but these are vacuous parts. Gambon is surely one of the best actors now at work in Britain (he's best known in the U.S. for playing Philip Marlow in *The Singing Detective* [1986] on PBS); but his role here has absolutely no growth or reward. His character merely repeats his coarseness and bullying over and over and over.

***City of Sadness*, Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1989**

(*The New Republic*, 11 June 1990)

Ignorance has not been bliss for some time now. Ever since the earth was drastically shrunk by communication systems, enlightenment makes our parochialism seem less blissful than lazy. In the film world this is particularly embarrassing. We set up categories and hierarchies in the world we know, without fully realizing the limitations of what we know. Here is a jolt to such arrangements. At the very least—and this film does more—it underscores how small a realm we pontificate about imperially.

In fact Hou Hsiao-hsien is not a new name to me. I saw two previous films of his at festival screenings, *Dust in the Wind* (1986) and *Daughter of the Nile* (1987); but only with his latest, *A City of Sadness* (1989), have I belatedly understood that he is much more than another homegrown “interesting” director. And this despite the fact that *A City of Sadness* is not as well constructed as the two others I've seen and, to judge by subtitles, is not always crystal clear. But by now his sense of drama, his perspicacious eye, and, above all, his modest yet thorough commitment as a national film bard make him an artist worth wide recognition.

Born in mainland China in 1947, he was a year old when his family moved to Taiwan, where he grew up, was educated, did his military service, and at twenty-seven entered films. He began directing in 1980 and in ten years has made nine features, besides doing other work. Taiwan, tried and troubled, has been his subject, and he has worked as every good artist has always done when dealing with his homeland: he has shown its uniqueness and its universality. The first element

he treats with loving intimacy, the second he doesn't treat at all—it's there to be inescapably inferred.

Part of *A City of Sadness* was filmed in a province of mainland China just across from Taiwan, shortly before Tiananmen Square brought about travel restrictions. (Ironically, the Anthology Film Archives in New York is presenting the film to mark the anniversary of Tiananmen Square.) Set in the turbulent 1945–1949 period, it deals with a Taiwanese family, a patriarch and his four grown sons, and the ways in which they do or don't weather those turbulences. Not all of the multi-stranded story registers equally well; but the violence of the times is vivid, and one story element, the romance of one of the sons—a deaf-mute photographer—is treated tenderly. What live especially in memory about this 158-minute film are Hou's visual gift (not limited to his eye for magnificent coastal scenery), his ability to make a story flow, and his treatment of common life as epic.

***Wild at Heart*, David Lynch, 1990** (*The New Republic*, 24 September 1990)

David Lynch wastes no time in setting the tone of his new film, *Wild at Heart* (1990). In the first scene Nicolas Cage, the hero—a term I use loosely—gets into a quarrel with a man at a dance hall and beats his head against the floor until his skull cracks and the brains ooze out. (The victim is a black man.) The story then intensifies.

Lynch wrote the screenplay from a 1990 novel by Barry Gifford and combines his versions of two familiar patterns: reckless lovers on the road as per *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), having fun before they run out of time and space; and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), as evidenced by references to the yellow brick road and brief appearances by the Wicked Witch and Glinda the Good Witch. The contradiction between these two basic stories is mainline Lynch. The contradiction is celebrated at the end when, after plentiful soakings in the grotesque, the film finishes in pure musical comedy.

Cage and his girlfriend, played by Laura Dern, love each other in North Carolina. After the opening fight, he serves a two-years-plus term for manslaughter and comes out to find that Dern has been waiting faithfully; despite her mother's loud objections, she is going to rejoin him. The mother, played by Dern's real-life mother, Diane Ladd, loathes the idea of the union. (There's a fleeting hint of her own interest in Cage.) The young lovers flee, and she sends in pursuit, first, her wimpy boyfriend who is a private eye, then a mobster, another boyfriend, with orders to kill Cage.

As the fleeing pair move on to New Orleans and to Texas, some of the people they encounter are: Isabella Rossellini, in a deliberately phony blond wig, as a hit man's moll, and Willem Dafoe, with repellent false teeth, as a sleazy, womanizing hood. (The film's most memorable scene is in a motel room where Dafoe heats the reluctant Dern to the point of submission, then gloatingly walks away from her.) Also some spherically fat women in the nude. Also a hooker with a brace on her leg and a cane.

A few of the incidents along the way: several auto accidents, whose gory results the lovers see; a severed head bouncing around; a dog running off with a human hand in its mouth (taken from Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* [1961]?); a flashback of Dern having an abortion a few years earlier; vomit. (Dern becomes pregnant, throws up in the motel room where she and Cage are staying for some days, and the mess is simply left there.)

Recurrent through the film is fire, sometimes in sheets of flame between shots, sometimes in matches struck close-up, sometimes in the figure of a man completely ablaze running around a house in agony. Eventually we learn that the man is Dern's father, who either immolated himself or was cremated alive by his wife and her lover. Also interwoven are shots of the younger Dern and her father's business partner just after he has violated her (presumably the cause of her abortion). These two strands, father and violator, are possibly supposed to explain, in some Oedipal way, why Dern is as she is. But in desires and outlook, she doesn't seem any different from Cage, about whose background we learn virtually nil.

Soon it's clear that these attempts at the deepening of Dern's character are not there for that purpose at all: character, in anything more than a poster-image of this person or that, is not the business of this film. The two lovers never grow to mean anything to us as people. Those background details are there simply because they give Lynch an added chance to load his film with more luridness, more mockery of "good taste."

But luridness is not his only décor, his only mockery. There is also the saccharine, the Oz trail. He says he is intent on showing us the underbelly of American life. Possibly. He's certainly interested in showing us the American sweet tooth. Besides the fairy-tale touches of the two witches, he ends the film with a reunion of the lovers—who have been parted by another of Cage's jail terms—climbing onto the hood of a car in the middle of a traffic jam and singing a duet. Both the gore and the goo, Lynch apparently is saying, are artificial, are products of a pop culture that distorts our understanding of experience.

One curious point, especially notable in a writer-director of the pointedly outrageous. We frequently observe Cage and Dern in bed, copulating furiously, always in positions that would make it possible for us to see the joining of their

genitals. But in each case a sheet is draped over that place. Question: Who draped the sheet? The Cage and Dern characters, themselves not wanting to see the junction? Or Lynch? Perhaps as another convolution of ironic humor. Or perhaps in anticipation of censorship problems, which would be still another kind of ironic humor since he didn't bother to mask the bouncing head.

Dern's performance is more a triumph of casting than of acting. As a wanton, passionate twenty-year-old, she seems most of the time an early teenager pretending to be grown-up. This isn't a bad effect for the role. Cage is dreadful. He is unbelievable both as a cause of passion in others or a source of it in himself. His outbursts of violence merely mark the page of the script where he was ordered to be violent. Someone like a young Brando or Nicholson was needed; if that's a pipe dream, surely they didn't have to settle for a supermarket delivery boy, which is all that Cage suggests here.

The best performance, the only one that can really be called acting, is Diane Ladd's as the mother. Ladd gives us a woman full of self-pity and shrewdness, full of sexual experience-and-guile, who has now reached the age when, if she wants to, she can turn off sexual heat in favor of cold power drive. Granted that Ladd has the only really developed character in the screenplay: she gives it everything. That cult favorite, Harry Dean Stanton, mooches along through the role of the private eye. Dafoe manages a touch of real revulsion under his makeup-artist's ugliness. Rossellini is, as usual, the weakest in the cast.

Lynch's last film, *Blue Velvet* (1986), and the two television episodes I saw of "Twin Peaks" (1990–91) in which he had a hand, left me feeling that he is much less interested in revealing the underbelly of American life than he is in selling coolness to those who are hungry for distance from the exploitations of American media. "Let me make you cool," Lynch seems to be saying. "My films and TV will help you to see through other films and TV." But he never quite reaches the needed perspective. Films like *Ariel* (1988) by Aki Kaurismäki or those of Jim Jarmusch view our various desolations and the media's handling of them differently—with clarity and completeness. Lynch seems to stagger from datum to datum. More: unlike those two directors, he seems to enjoy being stuck among the data.

***Barton Fink*, Joel & Ethan Coen, 1991** (*The New Republic*, 30 September 1991)

Those arty nuisances, Joel and Ethan Coen, are back. The first directs, the second produces, together they write, and together they have strewn the cinema landscape with the pretentious *Blood Simple* (1984) and *Miller's Crossing* (1990), plus a herniated farce called *Raising Arizona* (1987). Their latest, *Barton Fink* (1991), is billed

as a comedy, but it could also be billed as a drama, a satire, an allegory, or a *film* (partially) *noir*. It wouldn't matter, or help.

The license taken with credibility in the script is so extreme that we are meant to be cowed into acceptance. This film is so poetic, the Coens imply, so unusual, that only a dull literalist would carp. But as *Barton Fink* seems to me only gaseous fraudulence, I'll carp.

The time is 1941. (The Coens chose the date for a reason that backfires on them. See below.) Barton Fink is a New York playwright, patently modeled on Clifford Odets, who has a Broadway success, signs with Capitol Pictures, ensconces himself in a seedy L.A. hotel to prove he still has a social conscience, and proceeds to have trouble writing the movie about wrestling to which he is assigned. He becomes friendly with a hulking insurance salesman in the hotel room next door, also with another Capitol writer, a famous and sodden Southern novelist (guess who it's supposed to be), and his amanuensis-lover.

After fruitless days of struggle to get started on his script, Fink is liberated by a severe shock, writes a screenplay at white heat, and gets it rejected at white heat. All through the film he has been haunted by a color photo of a girl in a bathing suit on his dingy bedroom wall; at the end he meets such a girl. With this last meaningless symbolical nudge, the film ends.

Look first at the Coens' historical sense. They chose 1941 because Fink's play, of which we hear a few lines at the start, is pastiche Odets. The theater is the Belasco, where Odets's *Awake and Sing!* had its premiere. But the proletarian sentiments given to Fink personally—theater for the masses, and so on—were several important years out of date by 1941. Fink's ideas are all Deep-Depression talk. (*Awake and Sing!* appeared in February 1935.) By 1941 Odets and his fellows were mostly talking about the struggle against fascism in the war that was then raging. Later, in a fracas at a USO dance in Hollywood, Fink calls the soldiers and sailors "monsters." This is ridiculous: no one like Fink would have used that word at that time about those who were potential fighters against fascism.

Then there's the satire of Hollywood. After the towering tons of such satire, how does anyone have the energy, let alone the nerve, to satirize Tinseltown yet again? The producer (echoes of Louis B. Mayer) is a cagey brute full of overpraise, suspicion, vulgarity, and transparent wiliness. So what else is old? The stooges around him are die-stamped, the studio atmosphere is recycled Fitzgerald.

Then there's the character of Fink himself. For a man who is billed as a fire-brand, the author of a startling new play, he seems comatose, imperceptive. His responses to everything—the producer, the dingy hotel room, his neighbor at the hotel—are those of a provincial dullard being smothered in hustle. His reaction to a murder that enters his life would be out of character if he could be said to have a character. Would such a man have colluded in hiding a body? Would he then have

sat down and written feverishly night and day with a box on his desk that might well contain a human head? When the hotel is on fire and he is handcuffed to his bed, would he have remained so calm? Only in capital-A Art are such things possible.

John Turturro tries to play Fink, but Fink is not there to be played. Turturro isn't helped by the glasses and high hairdo that are supposed to suggest George S. Kaufman, co-author of the Hollywood satire *Once in a Lifetime* (1930), but even if he were presented otherwise, it wouldn't help. This is hardly his fault, since there are no compass points in the role, no logic—even, so to speak, emotional logic. All Turturro can do is what the Coens give him to do, and (again) they smother him in a series of stupid fabrications.

Three of the characters are graphically written and acted. The bibulous Southern novelist gets undertones of something more than alcoholism from John Mahoney. That splendid Australian actress, Judy Davis, plays his companion with humor and sympathy, though she is burdened with make-up that, in someone's opinion, indicates 1941. I don't recall that women looked like bad postcards of women in those days. John Goodman plays Fink's hotel neighbor, the insurance salesman, with Rotary good cheer. Goodman gives the part nice shadings, a full palette of old-fashioned salesman's brass-cum-pathos.

All of the picture's strain and silliness is meant to be excused, perhaps praised, because it serves as a base for Coen stylistics. These stylistics mean that, with Dennis Gassner's designs and Roger Deakins' lighting, the Coens have overloaded almost every shot with an impasto of thick, suffocating décor. Everything is italicized—producer's office, dank little hotel room—as a display of a virtuosity that never actually materializes. Pointless overhead shots are plentiful, as are immense close-ups of typing à la *Citizen Kane* (1941). Camera humor is juvenile. (While Fink is making love, the camera pans to the bathroom, then down the drain in the sink.)

The emptiness of Coen cinematics can be shown by one sequence. Fink is called down to the hotel lobby because two men are waiting for him. These men are first seen at some distance, lighted so as to suggest a bas-relief. They turn out to be two L.A. detectives who have come to question Fink. Why the fancy visual introduction? Only because the Coens evidently believe that connections between style and content are irrelevant, that incessant style will lure the viewer into blissful acceptance.

Somewhere in this overupholstered film there is a germ of an idea: a serious writer is paralyzed by the unreality he is asked to write about and is released by a shock of reality. But this theme is only gauzily visible in the hands of these arrogant and, ultimately, obtuse brothers. Not since Robert Altman has any American filmmaker been as overrated as this pair. The Coen brothers are Robert Altman rolled into two.

Barton Fink won the Best Film award at this year's Cannes Film Festival. Joel Coen won the Best Director award, John Turturro the Best Actor award. I note these facts not in fairness but in disgust.

***La Belle Noiseuse*, Jacques Rivette, 1991** (*The New Republic*, 4 November 1991)

Balzac's story "The Unknown Masterpiece" (1837) has been of extraordinary importance to many artists. As Dore Ashton tells us in *A Fable of Modern Art* (1980), Picasso illustrated a special edition of it, and Cézanne said that his favorite character in all literature was Frenhofer, the painter-protagonist of the story. For these artists and others, Frenhofer seems to dramatize the risks, rewards, and penalties of venturing into new realms of art.

Now the French filmmaker Jacques Rivette has made a film from the story, transposing it to the present from the seventeenth century of the original and using a somewhat different emphasis. *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991) runs a bit over four hours, which will not surprise those who know Rivette's work and which hints in advance at what his emphasis will be. He has been making films since 1949, unwaveringly serious in a wavering era, and most of them have been of exceptional length. (The best known is probably *Céline and Julie Go Boating* [1974].) I've seen only a few of his nineteen films and have usually admired his fidelity to his aesthetics, including the principle of length, more than the work itself. Not in this case. *La Belle Noiseuse* is, in a way, about time and it needs time. And it has beauty.

At least three of Rivette's films have been built around the rehearsals of plays, so it's logical that he wanted to treat this Balzac story, which is concerned with another artistic process—the painting of a picture—and the entangling of lives with it. Rivette's title is out of Balzac: it was the title of the masterpiece that Frenhofer was painting, a portrait of La Belle Noiseuse. This was the sobriquet of a seventeenth-century courtesan: the term translates as The Beautiful Nuisance or The Beautiful Maddener-to-Distract or something in that vicinity.

The screenplay is by Rivette, Pascal Bonitzer, and Christine Laurent. The setting is a huge chateau in southeastern France where Frenhofer lives with his wife, Liz, and where, renowned though he is, he does not paint—hasn't painted in ten years. His last attempt was an unfinished Belle Noiseuse for which his wife posed. Along comes a young painter, Nicolas, and his lover, Marianne. Nicolas, possibly trying to ingratiate himself with the great man, proposes that Marianne pose for him. Suddenly stimulated to the hope that he might accomplish his Noiseuse at last, Frenhofer agrees. Marianne, aware that she is something of a pawn here, agrees, too. All of them, including Liz, know that sooner or later the posing will be nude.

Marianne arrives next morning, and work begins, in Frenhofer's huge studio. At first she is clothed. At first he does only ink and charcoal sketches. Here and throughout the film we actually see Frenhofer working, see almost every stroke on paper or, subsequently, canvas. (The role is played by Michel Piccoli, but the hands we see at work are those of a painter, Bernard Dufour.) Before long, he tells her that there's a dressing gown hanging behind a screen. No more need be said. She goes upstairs, returns in the gown, drops it at his request, and is nude.

Now the film intensifies what has already begun: the experience of time in this creative act. Rivette often takes us through great stretches of real elapsed time, minute by minute, as Frenhofer draws or paints, as Marianne (which she comes to understand) collaborates. Rivette's chief accomplishment is to make us comprehend why this passage of time is necessary. He said once that a film is interesting "only if you have this feeling that the film pre-exists and that you are trying to reach it." Here he conjoins his own search with Frenhofer's search for his painting.

Marianne's body, like the whole film, is exquisitely lighted by the cinematographer, William Lubtchansky, who seems as intent on that body's secrets as Frenhofer is. Marianne poses, sitting or standing, as the artist requests, letting him arrange her arms and legs, her posture, as he sketches and sketches, exploring. While he works—while they work, one should say—he talks a little, sometimes referring cryptically to Rubek and Irene. They are the sculptor and his model in Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). The play's title is not mentioned, but its pertinence is clear enough.

Then Frenhofer moves to oils and canvas. The communion between artist and model, though she never quite sheds a tinge of resentment, though he never sees her as anything but a challenge, creates difficulties around them. Nicolas becomes almost jealous. Liz becomes differently jealous, because Marianne is "mating" with Frenhofer in a way that she failed to do. Yet neither the artist nor his wife is sanguine about the painting's progress.

As we watch, one of the great themes of art suffuses the screen, the erotics of the nude. Artists don't often do paintings or statues of unattractive nudes. (Rodin is one exception, especially his nude of Balzac!) Few would argue today that artists use nudes sheerly because the body is beautiful: the sexuality of that body, male or female, is part of the artwork. Frenhofer never makes the slightest advance toward Marianne, yet the film is charged with sex because of her nudity and Frenhofer's exploration of it on canvas. (We see less and less of the entire canvas as time goes on.) We sense in him a possible return to more than one kind of potency, whether or not the painting is pleasing him. And this may be one reason why Liz, through marital discoveries, oddly and contradictorily resents the painting.

The ending of the art enterprise has ambiguities—in the varied reactions to the finished work. We don't see it. Frenhofer, displeased, doesn't destroy it: he

bricks it up in his studio wall, which is a seeming act of confidence in those who may discover it later. Rather quickly, he paints another Noiseuse, which we do see. This is Rivette's one mistake. The crouched nude, back to us, surrounded by a sea of pale blue, seems a pallid conclusion to all that has gone before. But at least it throws the emphasis again on what has gone before, the passage through time in a creative enterprise.

Frenhofer's dealer likes this painting, however. And the four principals at least survive. In a sense, the story is told from Marianne's point of view: her voice-over begins and ends the film. It is her voice that assures us about the resumption of lives on the other side of this experience, lives that have been affected but are resumable.

Of the four principals, Jane Birkin, as Liz, is the weakest; once again, nonetheless, she is professionally sensitive. David Bursztein is sufficiently convincing as Nicolas. Emmanuelle Béart, who played the title role in *Manon of the Spring* (1986), is perfect as Marianne. She has the kind of beauty that increases rather than immediately stuns; and, tacitly, insinuatingly, affectingly, she evokes all the reluctances and curiosities of the role.

Inevitably, however, the film depends on Piccoli. In his long career he has often been excellent. Here he gives the performance of his life: coiled and shrewd, committed yet cynical, almost bemused at being warmed again by a fire he had thought dead. Piccoli has always combined a suggestion of intellect with one of slightly wearied animality. Here that fusion reaches its apex.

I've heard that there is a two-hour version of *La Belle Noiseuse*. I wouldn't want to see it. I can't argue that absolutely every brush stroke, every discarded sketch is essential; but the exploration of time as an ingredient of artistic creation has long been Rivette's interest, and he has found here his ideal subject. His film is a better artwork than anything we see of Frenhofer's on his studio walls. *La Belle Noiseuse* is a mature accomplishment, and, like most good films, it's as replenishing to think about later as to watch.

Raise the Red Lantern, Zhang Yimou, 1991

(The New Republic, 16 March 1992)

Zhang Yimou is the Chinese director who is getting more attention in this country (it's safe to say) than any other Chinese director has ever had. The Asia Society in New York is doing a Zhang retrospective, dealing with his achievements as cinematographer, actor, and director. Two of his films have been released here, and now comes a third. All three deal with a young woman's struggle against circumstances: in *Red Sorghum* (1987) as a battler for selfhood in the turbulent 1930s, in

Ju Dou (1990) as the 1920s wife of an old man who wants a son, and now in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) as the fourth wife of a wealthy man in the 1920s who fights her unhappy fate and who suffers the consequences.

The title describes what happens when the husband chooses which of his wives he is going to sleep with that night: lanterns are raised outside her quarters. It's a palatial establishment with virtually separate houses for each of the wives. The story proceeds at a leisurely pace, made to seem even more so because the outcome is foreseeable early. Presumably the cultural details and references are what enrich the film for a Chinese viewer, but they were lost on me.

Zhang knows a great deal about filmmaking, but there is a stolidity in his work that intervenes between us and what is supposed to move us. He loves symmetry: he repeats and repeats symmetrically framed shots in a way that stifles whatever personality he has to express.

The most interesting shot is the very first. Gong Li, the talented young woman who has played the lead in all three of his films, faces the camera while an off-screen voice tells her that she is to be married to the rich man. Without any cutaway, with the camera holding right on her, Gong Li produces tears on cue.

***Slacker*, Richard Linklater, 1991** (*The New Republic*, 8 July 1991)

One of the older contradictions in art is the nihilist work. If the center cannot hold and the rough beast is already in the suburbs of Bethlehem, why bother to write a novel or poem or play about it since all is lost anyway? Yet some of our best twentieth-century art has been nihilist—Céline, Beckett, (some of) Sartre. Not quite in their class but certainly in their vein, or one part of it, is a new American filmmaker named Richard Linklater. He wrote and directed and acts in *Slacker* (1991), a chronicle of suspended animation in Austin, Texas.

It's witty, though a bit too long, in its account of a group of (mostly) young people whose chief aim in life is to hang out. They care only for small gratifications, despise work, are resigned to the world's destruction—and they don't worry. Yet about these people, himself playing one of them, Linklater has made a film that is only seemingly casual, that (he assures us) was carefully scripted, cast, and rehearsed. The very existence of this picture contradicts its mood.

The structure is the old relay-race form. The film stays with A until A meets B, then it continues with B until B meets C, and so on. At the start a young man (Linklater) gets off a bus in Austin and takes a taxi. The camera then goes to the hood of the cab's motor as it travels, shooting past the impassive driver as the young man in the back seat launches into a discursive, fairly funny monologue about his

dreams, about the reality of roads not taken, why they are just as real as the road taken, and so on.

When he leaves the cab, we hear the screech of a car starting quickly. After it zooms past, he sees a woman lying in the road, her groceries spilled. The young man stops to look. A jogging woman, still jogging in place, stops to look. Then the camera goes to the driver of the car who, we learn, is the son of the woman in the road, whom he threw out. And so on, each “relay-runner” contributing some oddity in a spaced-out way. (Some of the people are connected tangentially with the University of Texas.)

It’s all a higher-grade undergraduate prank, though it’s only occasionally touched with undergraduate solemnity—that is, genuine belief in merely clever phrases. Most of the time, it’s parody or put-on, a kind of cartoon-strip mixture of existential *angst* and store-front mysticism.

***Monster in a Box*, Nick Broomfield, 1991** (*The New Republic*, 6 July 1992)

Most of the comment about Spalding Gray, admiring though it rightly is, seems to me slightly skewed. He is praised for his heterodox, adventurous films, but that adventure of his begins in the theater. (Gray has been active for twenty-five years in the Off-Off Broadway theater; he was a founding member of the Wooster Group, which did a number of his pieces at the Performing Garage.) Why is *Monster in a Box* (1991) any more adventurous on film than it was on stage? (Likewise his previous film, *Swimming to Cambodia* [1987].) It’s assumed that Gray is more daring when he transfers his monologues to the screen because film demands greater visual variety than the theater and because film is inimical to language. Both of these assumptions are dubious (as plentiful examples show). To put it crassly, Gray runs just as much of a risk of tedium in the theater as he does on screen. The risks alter somewhat from one medium to another, but the success in the first venture emboldens the second.

Other one-person shows have been effectively transferred to film, Richard Pryor’s and Lily Tomlin’s, for prime instances; but Pryor deals in a series of riffs and Tomlin does a series of sketches. In thematically continuous, comic seriousness, I can think of only one forebear of Gray’s work, Wallace Shawn’s *My Dinner with André* (1981), which, too, was done first in the theater by Shawn and André Gregory, then filmed under Louis Malle’s direction. And this is a farfetched choice, of course, because next to Gray, Shawn’s cast of two seems immense. But Gray, like Shawn, is earnestly funny and, above all else, articulate.

A pleasant-looking man, Gray sits before us at a desk—most of the time, anyway—as a companion, rather than a performer, not really old (he is around

fifty) though with fluffy white hair, and recounts his adventures. He chooses where to begin, then (seemingly) free-associates for eighty-eight minutes. His previous monologue, *Swimming to Cambodia*, was built around his engagement for a small role in *The Killing Fields* (1984). This one is built around his signing with Knopf to write a novel. He has the monster 1,900-page manuscript on the desk, together with the box in which he carried the growing pile around, as he moved through New York, to Houston, to Hollywood, to the Soviet Union, to Nicaragua.

In all those places, Gray reveals himself as the sort of person to whom odd things happen; but then we see that the real difference between him and others is not really the oddity of the events but that he perceived them oddly and relishes them retrospectively. True, not many of us have been sent to Nicaragua by Columbia Pictures or have been engaged to play the Stage Manager in a Broadway production of *Our Town* (1938), but he makes us feel that even if we had done those things, we wouldn't have picked the fruits of those experiences as he has done.

He begins by telling us blandly that, when his mother committed suicide in 1967, he was off vacationing in Mexico. That opening sets the key: a grim fact put in a bland context. A performer who was out only for boffos wouldn't have mentioned the suicide, and the way he mentions it relies on our understanding of why he gives those two facts almost equal weight. Further, the suicide, which comes up again later, serves as backdrop to this chronicle of a hip *Candide*.

The strongest element in the piece is also the subtlest. If we ask what the purpose of the monologue is, what it really accomplishes, the answer is before us the whole time. What we are hearing about are some of the events that helped to create the person who is telling us this story.

Swimming to Cambodia was directed by Jonathan Demme, who did as little as possible, relying on Gray—writer and performer—to hold us. Demme's directing (as I recall) conceded very little to the specific difficulties posed for film by Gray's form. Nick Broomfield, however, who directed *Monster in a Box*, starts with an inferiority complex toward the theater and a constant need to prove that film can deal with the piece. Every time there's a chance for a sound effect—traffic, earthquake rumbles, whatever—Broomfield lays it on. Every time there's the slightest excuse for a lighting change, sometimes even when there isn't an excuse, Broomfield pounces. And with the editor, Graham Hutchings, he does a lot of that arbitrary cutting from one side to another that TV frets about, in order to avoid the "talking head" charge. When a head can talk as well as Gray's, why not leave it alone as much as you can? Why inflict on it the strictures derived from lesser heads?

Only one quibble about Gray. He performs his piece on a stage in front of an audience (though we see them only at the beginning), thus he talks to them throughout. But from time to time, he looks at the camera, which is especially noticeable when it's directly to his left or right where the audience could not be.

These looks are small fractures of the theater effect. If they are supposed to make the film more cinematic, they have the opposite effect. They reveal a worry that Gray should have been above.

Note on the Monster. Gray's novel, the ostinato of his piece, is called *Impossible Vacation*, was condensed to 228 pages, and was published in 1992 by Knopf. It's a peculiar experience. After seeing Gray on stage and screen, it was difficult merely to read the book: I kept hearing it. Like his monologues, it's a first-person narrative and is couched in his customary "voice." For some reason, he has changed the narrator's name to Brewster North, but there is every intent to have us think the book autobiographical, especially since a few episodes—including his mother's suicide—are much the same as in *Monster in a Box*.

From time to time, markedly in the boyhood sections, the writing is lovely. ("I remember being there in bed thinking, or imagining—because back then there was no difference between thinking and imagining ...") Very often through the book, the tone is pure Gray—quiet joy at having discovered how to savor life's smaller opportunities as well as the larger ones. Example: he is in a Zen retreat where the diet is only vegetables with brown rice. "I'd never had such a pure and intense taste sensation before. Original sin, I began to think, was not Adam eating the apple but Adam not eating it slowly enough really to enjoy it."

But the colors in the novel are quite different from the monologue. It's as if, when he was preparing *Monster in a Box* (and even *Swimming to Cambodia*), Gray had winnowed out all the dark, troubled, frantic elements and saved them for this book: a lot of heavy drugging; a lot of wandering around the world in search of self, as far as Tibet; a jail term in Las Vegas; gay baths in Amsterdam; performing in a porno film in New York. (North/Gray was born in 1941, and some of these episodes are pure '60s.)

The book's interest—which it certainly has—depends on the novelty and variety of the episodes, as related by the narrator in the wide-eyed yet serene tone of an intelligent man discovering what it's possible to get into just through the accident of living. But inevitably it lacks what the monologues have throughout: the physical presence of Gray himself.

Reservoir Dogs, Quentin Tarantino, 1992 (*The New Republic*, 23 November 1992)

How happy the human race must be these days. Photography and cinematography have done so much to further our age-old appetite for the sanguine. It's as if, after many centuries of waiting, those of us who do not actually hack or bludgeon now

have the chance to see the hacked and bludgeoned. The latest issue of *Granta* has a piece by Luc Sante—part of a new book called *Evidence* (1992)—that consists of police-file photographs of murder victims with his critical comments on them. In his aesthetic study of these pictures, “a style announced itself, deliberate and inimitable.”

But never mind police files. Killing is in full flood around the globe—see tomorrow’s newspaper—and we can all savor it in detail. Out of Vietnam, television created the Living-Room War; now we have the living-room world slaughter. Every morning, along with the orange juice, blood; every evening, along with the nightcap, blood. Who could ask for more?

We could. Real blood is not enough. We want more. Thus many kinds of films, from the fantastic to the factual, pour out to slake us.

When the subject of film violence is raised, there’s one predictable response: violence is sanctified by its antiquity in drama, from the children of Atreus to the present. Of course, without violence (and the other equally dominant theme, sex), drama wouldn’t exist. What this means is that, from the start, the drama recognized that almost all human beings are basically, ultimately, xenophobic and homicidal.

Then why raise the subject again? First, to inquire whether the argument from antiquity covers every case. Second, to try to find out whether I’m going insane. Adjustment to changing values is the prime law of the twentieth century, but once in a while a film comes along that makes me imagine that everyone has a mental compass on the subject of violence and that I must tap mine to make sure it’s not stuck.

Perhaps what I’m saying is that 1992 is not 1969. In 1969 we got Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*, which outraged many with its bloodletting but which struck me as an exemplary Artaudian work of art—even if Peckinpah had never heard of Antonin Artaud. In “The Theater and Cruelty” Artaud wrote that he wanted the theater to focus on, among other things, “atrocious crimes” in relation to “the terrible lyricism” of mankind’s prevailing myths. This is precisely what Peckinpah’s film did. It took the Western out of its false sentimental precincts (even as used by the genius of John Ford) and brought it into ancient, profound continuities.

Now comes a gangster film called *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), crammed with murders, which has little relation to anything but itself. With a considerable heave, this might be seen as postmodernist, but even if true, it would be an afterthought. The immediate effect of *Reservoir Dogs* is to make us tap that mental compass. It’s not the most violent picture ever; what film could aspire to that title? But it’s so well made, the violence is so gratuitous, and the general reception has been so delighted, that attention must be paid.

It's a first film, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino, who also plays a small role. Almost from the start, we see blood. After a diamond robbery, two members of the robber gang are fleeing in a car; one is the driver and the other is a man in the back seat, gut-shot, who is blood-drenched and hysterical about dying. The driver knows he can't take the wounded man to a hospital or a doctor, so he speeds to the warehouse that is the gang's rendezvous and deposits him on the floor with empty words of reassurance.

In this empty warehouse, as on a stage, most of the film is played out. Other gang members turn up, all of them certain that their caper was tipped to the police; hence the shoot-out through which they had to escape with their loot. There is a fink in the gang, apparently. The film's bloodbath goes on, especially through flashbacks that explain what led these various men to this warehouse. One arrival brings in a hostage policeman, who is tied to a chair and eventually tortured to make him identify the fink. At one point the torturer makes jokes with the cop's severed ear.

A good deal of *Reservoir Dogs* (a title I don't understand) was difficult for me to watch. The razor stuff, especially, made me avert my eyes. But, cinematically speaking, it's plainly the debut of a talent. The opening sequence under the credits, in which the camera very slowly keeps circling the gang sitting around a restaurant table discussing sex and ribbing one of the gangsters for refusing to tip the waitress, alerts us immediately. The way Tarantino sees this sequence and his tap-dance, snare-drum rhythms of dialogue promise that this filmmaking will be better than most, especially most first films. The promise is kept; yet at the end I was left with a kind of despair.

Yes, Tarantino has a sense of dramatic disposition and, with his imaginative cinematographer Andrzej Sekula, he lights and frames every scene as if he were sculpting it. Yes, the very last moments of the film quite consciously take the multiple killings and the torrential gore into the edges of satire. What depresses is that a director of Tarantino's cinematic gifts should have chosen this particular film for his debut. It has so little plot—the search for the fink is its only thread—that it clearly was made just for the sake of its making, the application of style to sheer slaughter. Indulging the so-called critical fallacy of trying to decipher an artist's intent, I'd hazard that Tarantino wrote this script because he thought it would be relatively easy to get it financed. Is this to accuse him of cynicism? Well, what god hovers over this film but the classic deity of cynicism?

Which does not let us, the audience, off the hook. Whatever Tarantino's reasons for writing his screenplay, financiers would not have backed it unless they thought they could rely on us to see it. Filmmaking affects society much less than society affects filmmaking; and, as one of the audience, I become particularly aware from time to time of what filmmakers take for granted about me. I'm still tapping that mental compass.

The actors all do well enough—notably Lawrence Tierney as the granitic gang chief, Harvey Keitel and Michael Madsen as two of his mob—but it's difficult to be impressed by the acting of gangster roles. They are almost our equivalent, in conventions, of Noh drama. No doubt that at the Pearly Gates, the Guardian asks an American actor: "I know, I know, gangster roles. But what else?"

***Guelwaar*, Ousmane Sembène, 1992** (*The New Republic*, 6 September 1993)

Jay Leyda, the esteemed film historian, taught at Yale for a few years during my time there and once did me a big favor. I was forced to miss a meeting of my film class one week, and I asked him if he would be willing to take over for me. He agreed amiably. I told him about the film that had been rented for that week, and that, I thought, was that. The following week I learned that he hadn't even opened the cans of the scheduled film. Instead, he had shown and talked about a film by the Senegalese writer-director Ousmane Sembène.

This didn't in the least diminish my gratitude: I just wished I had been able to hear Leyda. I had seen at least one of Sembène's films by then and understood Leyda's regard for his talent, simplicity, and compassion—as well as his respect for the difficulties under which Sembène worked. Sembène is now seventy and has made only seven films. Of course he started late—he was forty when he made his first—but presumably he could have done more work under conditions more favorable than those in Senegal.

His latest, *Guelwaar* (1992), is a simple story, which, like many folk tales, discloses much more than its narrative. The time is today. The chief settings are a Catholic village and a Muslim village. A prominent Catholic dies in a hospital at the same time as a prominent Muslim. When the Muslim family come for their relative's corpse, the morgue attendant mistakenly gives them the Catholic's remains (the face stays wrapped), which they bury in a Muslim cemetery. When the Catholics come for their relative, the mistake is discovered. Much of the film is about the Catholics' efforts to disinter the Catholic from the Muslim cemetery and bury him where he belongs. (No attention is paid to the Muslim corpse waiting patiently in the morgue for burial.)

Obviously, from one angle, this is a farcical story, which Sembène doesn't overlook. But the film soon deepens into the social seriousness entailed in religious dispute, brewing up the threat of violence. One unexpected development arises through flashbacks of the deceased Catholic, *Guelwaar*. (This is a sobriquet that means Noble One.) He had been strongly opposed to Senegal's dependence on foreign aid, and at one point it's suspected that his body's disappearance is

connected to his political views. His hatred of economic dependence was so strong that, though he deplored his daughter's working as a prostitute in Dakar in order to send money home, he preferred it to her begging or to the begging his family would have needed to do otherwise. This patriarchal view of the matter is never questioned. At the finish Guelwaar's opposition to foreign aid is put into practice by young men of the village.

The film is spoken in French and Wolof: French, which is still the official language of Senegal, is apparently something of a social marker. However, more impressive than the language used by anyone is the manner of speaking. In ordinary domestic conversation, one person addresses another with his or her full name, followed by a slight pause before proceeding, as if beginning a letter. This gives the ordinary chat of a village something of the arch of formal discourse.

Another very taking element at Sembène's disposal is Senegalese textile design. The women's gowns, for everyday use, are full in fold and gorgeous in pattern. The contrast between the skimpiness of the way of life, the cane huts and the dirt floors, and the richness of those materials is inescapable. The most extraordinary aspect of this design bonanza is that no one ever mentions it: it's taken for granted.

But the most important component of the film is Sembène's directorial simplicity—simplicity crystallized, heightened, by skill. One small instance. The village priest is talking to the prostitute, returned for her father's funeral, urging her to reconsider her life. She stands not quite facing us while he walks a short distance back and forth behind her. This compact design makes his remarks, gentle and empathic, seem to be wearing away at her while simultaneously we can see their effect on her. A quiet touch of directing deftness.

There's a risk, when discussing directors who deal simply with people they know and love, of shoveling them all into the same basket. Sembène is not Idrissa Ouédraogo, and not just because Ouédraogo is from Burkina Faso instead of Senegal. But Sembène and Ouédraogo share a belief in film as a modern medium which can take over ancient work, that of the bard—using film as a treasury, free of the printed page, of what each man holds dear.

***The Player*, Robert Altman, 1992** (*The New Republic*, 11 May 1992)

Robert Altman makes an assumption about his viewers. He assumes that they are wisened-up—hip and self-congratulatory about their hipness. His latest film, *The Player* (1992), is hailed as his long-awaited return after an absence of some years, as further proof that he is an unappreciated master. I dissent. I haven't missed him; and I think he's overappreciated.

The Player, with a screenplay by Michael Tolkin from his own 1988 novel, is a film-world film. Just as the theater loves plays about the theater, so Hollywood loves films, however satirical, about Hollywood. (Chaplin's second short, *Kid Auto Races at Venice*, in 1914, was about filmmaking.) In this case the story is sprinkled with brief appearances by famous faces, as if to prove that it's really about the real Hollywood. How we are to distinguish between actors—say, Tim Robbins and Greta Scacchi—who play fictitious characters and actors such as Anjelica Huston and Burt Reynolds, who appear as themselves, is an aesthetic question that never really arises because the picture is insufficiently pressing.

Robbins plays a boy-wonder studio executive who is slipping because he hasn't come up with anything good lately. He is threatened by the emergence of an even younger hotshot producer at his studio. He is also threatened, physically, by an anonymous writer whom he once rejected. Robbins gets into a situation where he actually murders the writer—he thinks. The story winds through a lot of false trails without any sort of center. In crudest terms, there's no one to root for, and, unlike the work of Mamet or Pinter, for instance, the story isn't remotely strong enough to thrive without such a center. The end is pointlessly wry.

The film is supposed to afford an inside view of Hollywood. It does, I suppose, but allowing for a change in proper nouns and in a few numbers, it's the same old inside view. The story's nub is an idea for a screenplay that is pitched to the studio and that is considered terrific. The studio makes the picture. But the screenplay sounds so stupid that the enthusiasm for it demolishes the supposed expertise of the people involved. Robbins' performance doesn't help; usually he's an adequate behavior in films, but here he is merely wispy and disheveled. Scacchi's role, as a fey painter, is overwritten because it serves no real purpose in the picture.

Altman's direction is undistinguished except for two showy set pieces. First, at the start, a very long tracking shot done with dolly and crane, whose presumed virtuosity is underscored by someone's mention of the opening shot of Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) while it's going on. Second, a nightmarish confrontation in a Pasadena police station with Whoopi Goldberg as the chief detective twirling a tampon as she talks. This so-brave joke is typical of a picture that strains hard to be smart and is ultimately repellent.

***Germinal*, Claude Berri, 1993** (*The New Republic*,
21 March 1994)

In their journals the Goncourt brothers record that, on December 14, 1868, Emile Zola came to lunch:

He talked about how hard his life was, how much he needed and would like to find a publisher who would give him 36,000 francs at the rate of 6,000 per year, so that he might be assured a livelihood for himself and his mother and thus be able to write the “history of a family” that he had in mind, a novel in eight volumes.

Things worked out for the twenty-eight-year-old Zola, and he wrote that history of a family, the Rougon-Macquarts, which in fact ran to twenty volumes.

Those novels are of immense importance both to the rise of naturalism and to its assumption of a place amidst the resources of literature. (After a style has burst forth in any art, and has aroused discussion, it then mildly takes its place in the family of styles, along with others that once, too, ruled the roost when they were new.) But Zola’s novels also had a marked effect on the theater and, in time, on film.

In 1902 the French director André Antoine produced a dramatization of one of them, *La Terre*, at his theater, and after he moved into cinema, he filmed it in 1919. One of the first films I ever reviewed was *Gervaise* (1956), made from *L’Assommoir* (1877), about a Paris washerwoman; she is the mother of the hero of the latest Zola film, *Germinal* (1993), and is referred to in this new picture by her son. *Germinal*, published in 1885, had previously “inspired” a French film in 1912 and was itself filmed by Yves Allégret in 1963. And all these are only a few instances of the way that Zola’s fictional family’s lineage has intertwined with the lineage of French theater and film.

Claude Berri, who directed this latest *Germinal*, continues his own evolving career. He began with such glop as the short *The Chicken* (1962) and *The Two of Us* (1967) but has grown into a director of epic sweep comparable to Bertrand Tavernier. *Jean de Florette* (1986) and *Manon of the Spring* (1986) were large-sized in every good way, and *Uranus* (1990), set in postwar France, though it didn’t quite succeed, had the same sense of size, understood and embraced.

With *Germinal*, the very first shot is reassuring. Night. A few lights. The camera pans slowly and discovers, at a distance, the works at a coal mine head, fires blazing, giant gaunt structures casting shadows, men and heavy horses moving like figures in a hell transposed to the surface of the earth. As we approach, we are stunned by its stark, somehow complex simplicity. The cinematographer was Yves Angelo, who did *Tous les Matins du Monde* (1991), *The Accompanist* (1992), and *Un Coeur en Hiver* (1992), all of which were refined work. Here Berri brings him into a broad spectacular mode, without abandoning his former delicacy. This opening sequence shows why naturalism and the theatrical were made for each other; later interiors, of miners’ hovels and of managers’ villas, are like the best traditional painting of the time.

That time is the late 1860s. The place is northern France. Berri, with a screen-play on which Arlette Langmann collaborated, carries us through Zola’s account

of Etienne Lantier, who arrives looking for work in the mine, is taken on as a hauler, boards with a miner named Maheu, his wife, Maheude, and their family. Etienne soon plunges into the realities of mine work, the intricacies of socio-sexual relations among the miners and their women (some of whom work in the mine), the simmerings of revolt against the wretched and dangerous conditions of their lives. Counterpointing these elements are the lives of the bosses, ultra luxe, elegant, frivolous. Eventually there is a strike; eventually, too, there are terror and bitter resolution. (A reminder here of another film about a labor struggle, Monicelli's magnificent *The Organizer*, made in 1963.)

All of these components Berri handles with clarity, immediacy, and engaging pace. If we begin to feel uneasy about Berri's brusque juxtaposition of miners' grub with the pheasant and patisserie at the rich tables, we can remember that Berri is simply following Zola's blueprint. If the opposition looks too blunt here, it's not Berri's fault: it's because prose, the very being of prose itself, acts as buffer between contrasting elements; quick cutting from one place to another doesn't afford that kind of buffer in film.

But, sadly to note, despite the patent sincerity of Berri's work, this rendering of *Germinal* isn't fulfilled—because (which is quite unlike him) there are three major miscastings. Etienne, Zola's twenty-year-old hero, is played by Renaud (a.k.a. Pierre Manuel Séchan), the mono-named popular singer who is much too old and, more importantly, dull. Renaud has no warmth or depth. For instance, he warns others about his fierce temper, but when it explodes, it is merely an action done on cue.

Judith Henry plays Maheu's oldest daughter, with whom Etienne falls in love but who is involved with another miner, Chaval. She, too, is dull. The descriptions of her effect on her admirers, the violence she provokes between them, are not credible. The biggest drawback is the biggest name, Gérard Depardieu, who is Maheu. Many have remarked about his ample girth in this role of an underfed miner, but what's worse, he seems only a plump visitor to the film. Depardieu is an overwhelmingly gifted man with breathtaking range—the city man as farmer in *Jean de Florette*, the title role in *Danton* (1983), the anguished priest in *Under the Sun of Satan* (1987) are just a few instances. But sometimes Depardieu-the-reputation smothers Depardieu-the-actor, as in *Cyrano* (1990), which he merely bullied his way through, and here. He seems consciously the star willing to take a non-star role, becoming in some scenes a member of the mob, yet both bland and obtrusive as such.

These three people weaken a film that contains some fine acting: Miou-Miou as Maheude, who has to deal with three deaths in her family; Jean-Roger Milo as Chaval, rough and frightening as Etienne's rival; Jacques Dacqumine as the mine manager, full of craggy self-confidence in his dealings with the dissident men; Jean Carmet as the half-maddened old miner who coughs coal dust; Laurent Terzieff

as the anarchist miner who despises his co-workers because they want merely to strike, not destroy.

But these performances, vivid though they are, are not positioned to give the film the central verity that it needs; and Berri's directing, as such, can't fill the gap. This is a fundamental, vitiating flaw. When we see *The Organizer*, we never ask why we need a film about early labor struggles at this late date: Marcello Mastroianni, Folco Lulli, and all the cast seize us, draw us in. But when *Germinal* ends, for all its assets, we do ask why we need it today. The question wouldn't arise if the principal actors had brushed it away.

***The Piano*, Jane Campion, 1993** (*The New Republic*, 13 December 1993)

A film about a woman who plays the piano. *The Piano* (1993), garlanded with Cannes Festival prizes, is an overwrought, hollowly symbolic glob of glutinous nonsense. The New Zealand writer-director Jane Campion, who made an appealing film of Janet Frame's autobiography *An Angel at My Table* (1990), here reverts to the thick, self-conscious poeticizing of her first film, *Sweetie* (1889).

In the mid-nineteenth century, a young Scotswoman, played by Holly Hunter, goes with her small (illegitimate) daughter to an arranged marriage in the New Zealand outback. The woman is mute; we're never told the cause, though she sometimes speaks to us on the soundtrack. She insists on taking her piano with her, so even the dimmest among us can perceive that the piano is her symbolic voice.

Her "voice" is hellishly troublesome to bring ashore on the wild coast and to carry through the dense forest. Once established in her new home, Hunter doesn't respond to her husband, Sam Neill, though in time she does respond to her neighbor, Harvey Keitel (here he's a Scotsman with Maori tattooings—more symbolism). The story would be merely another wilderness triangle except for the illogic. When Neill discovers Hunter in bed with Keitel, he hides under the house to listen to them; later, however, he cuts off one of Hunter's fingertips when she merely tries to communicate with Keitel.

All this is ladled over with a rich gravy of tropical foliage, Maori simple wisdom, and much assumption on the film's part of our utter sympathy for this quite peculiar woman. At the end she and Keitel leave together, and en route the piano is hurled into the sea. Wow. What a symbol—the piano on the ocean floor. Only a clod like me would ask what it's a symbol of—since, at the last, Hunter is still mute and is playing another piano, her injured finger tipped with metal.

Every moment is upholstered with the suffocating high-mindedness that declines to connect symbols with comprehensible themes. I haven't seen a sillier

film about a woman and a piano since John Huston's *The Unforgiven* (1960), a Western in which Lillian Gish had her piano carried out into the front yard so she could play Mozart to pacify attacking Indians.

Wittgenstein, Derek Jarman, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 11 October 1993)

In his later years Roberto Rossellini made films about Socrates, Pascal, and Descartes that were interesting, in good part, because they were done with brave simplicity. When I heard that an English film was being made on Wittgenstein, I hoped for the same simplicity; then I heard that it was being directed by Derek Jarman, a master (or slave) of overwrought pictorialism, and I stopped hoping.

O me of little faith. Jarman's *Wittgenstein* (1993) is not only unexpectedly reticent in style, it is beautiful. Not only is it not lush, it inhabits a magical sparseness reminiscent of Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse* (1986) or passages in Syberberg. Almost all the scenes are staged (the operative word) against a black background: no more scenery and furniture are used than are absolutely required.

The effect, then, is like that of *Thérèse*—a pilgrimage, though this one couldn't be more different from the saint's: from Rothschild-rich beginnings in Vienna to Manchester and Cambridge, then to the Austrian army in World War I, then to Alpine-village schoolmastering, then to Cambridge again, with lots of troubles, then death at sixty-two. Most of the episodes, though often treated more fancifully than veristically, are lighted to make them resemble Northern European painting—Memling, Cranach, that order of art. The atmosphere fits the subject.

The fine points continue. The screenplay was written by Jarman and Terry Eagleton, the Marxist literary critic and Oxford don who has written plays. (The producer was Tariq Ali, the same Tariq Ali previously known for political activism.) The screenplay draws most of its wit, perception, and tacit eloquence from the writings and conversations of Wittgenstein himself, but they have been selected and deployed with further wit and perception.

I can confidently vouch for the authenticity of all that Wittgenstein says and does in this film because it has already been vouched for by a person who knows as much about Wittgenstein's life as anyone alive, Ray Monk, author of the excellent biography published in 1990. Monk reviewed the film in the *Times Literary Supplement* of March 19, 1993, and said:

Wittgenstein once wrote that he could sum up his attitude to philosophical writing by saying that it ought to be written as if it were poetry. ... The most one could expect from a film of Wittgenstein's life is that it does something to capture this poetic

intensity. In fact, Derek Jarman's exceptionally fine piece of work does much more than that. It almost, in fact, achieves the impossible; it almost shows how philosophy can be dramatized.

The authenticity began with Jarman and Eagleton, and it is consummated by the actor of Wittgenstein, Karl Johnson. The facial resemblance is startlingly close, but at least as close is Johnson's persona, his tension, the sense of an interior strung with tight humming wires, an impatience with the universe that begins with himself. Not one profound utterance, not one flippant utterance, no fit of temper or of sullen iciness is actorish. Thus, in a way, the film takes on the quality of a surreal documentary.

This feeling is counterbalanced, or perhaps made stronger, by Jarman's imaginative touches. The boy Wittgenstein, about eleven or so, whom we meet at the start, recurs through the film as a kind of chorus, sometimes with a banner bearing the first line of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1921): "The world is all that is the case." The appearances of Wittgenstein's family, first shown in ancient Roman dress possibly to indicate their imperial wealth, are treated in a distilled, evocative manner—including those of his brother Paul, the pianist who lost his right arm in World War I. (Paul then commissioned appropriate works by Strauss, Prokofiev, Britten, and Ravel. I once heard/saw him play Ravel's "Concerto for the Left Hand Alone" with the New York Philharmonic.) A Martian is extrapolated from *On Certainty* (published posthumously in 1969) who converses occasionally with Wittgenstein.

Other notable figures in and around his life are treated dexterously. Tilda Swinton, the leading woman of *Orlando* (1992), is almost unrecognizable here because of her vitality as Lady Ottoline Morrell. John Quentin is amused by humankind as the bisexual Maynard Keynes, and Lynn Seymour, the English ballerina, plays Keynes's ballerina wife, Lydia Lopokova, with samovar charm. Michael Gough is thoughtfully pleasant and vice versa as Bertrand Russell, but as Monk notes, he doesn't suggest the man's aristocratic provenance. Russell was an earl. (I once was squelched by Russell when I asked him a question after a lecture and can testify to his hauteur.) Johnny, the lover of both Keynes and Wittgenstein, is, as Monk notes, a composite character, well composed by Kevin Collins.

The boy who plays the young Ludwig is not only an inadequate actor, he is out of place. His puffy features could not possibly have evolved into the aquiline man's, and he has a cockney accent while Johnson uses a wondrously subtle Germanic accent. The casting of that boy is the one Jarmanesque intrusion in the film.

On the other hand, the arrant anachronisms are amusing. A barber seventy years ago has a Velcro band on the protective covering for customers. In World War I, Wittgenstein uses an automatic rifle that wasn't invented until much later.

These seem the sort of joke that Wittgenstein himself might have crinkled at, though on his deathbed he says he had no sense of humor.

Monk makes one slip. He lists some of the factors he considers well handled, then adds: "As for the question of Jewishness, Jarman ignores it altogether. In all this, he shows perfect taste." However, there is one brief scene of Wittgenstein standing before a background of many, many six-pointed stars. Seemed tasteful enough to me.

One of the integral ironies of this acute, intelligent, lovely film is that Wittgenstein most certainly would not have liked it. He liked Western and musical films; his favorite stars were Carmen Miranda and Betty Hutton. We see him several times at the movies with Johnny, more relaxed than at any other time. Films, the kinds that he liked, were apparently a deep means of escape for him, not from commonplace daily pressures but from the compulsion to think. Of Jarman's film, Monk says, "This, emphatically, would not have been his sort of thing."

The irony cuts deeper: Wittgenstein once contended that a good British film was an impossibility. Somehow this makes Wittgenstein even more Wittgensteinian.

***Ruby in Paradise*, Victor Nuñez, 1993** (*The New Republic*, 1 November 1993)

Victor Nuñez had a hard time raising the money to make *Ruby in Paradise* (1993). I'm surprised that he raised it at all. In this age of film gimmick and blam and blast, here's a writer-director who wanted to make a picture simply because he was interested in some characters. It's a story whose outline has no novelty, but it's one that, unlike so many film stories, doesn't exist for the sake of its outline. It has people in it.

Ruby Lee Gissing, around twenty, comes from Tennessee to Panama City, on the gulf in northern Florida, because she wants to break loose and find her life. She tells a new girlfriend that she got out of her hometown "without getting pregnant or getting beat up," and that it took some doing. Now she finds a sales job in a beachware shop run by the middle-aged Mrs. Chambers, who doesn't really need anyone but is taken by the girl's polite persistence.

Ruby is warned against Mrs. Chambers' good-looking son, Ricky, but the warning doesn't help. Heavy involvement follows, from which she wrenches free because, as she says, she didn't come all the way from Tennessee just to be his "chippie." Soon she takes up with a quite different kind of man, Mike, who works in a plant nursery and who—as she confides to her diary in the voice-over that runs through the film—believes in "low-impact living." This affair is much more pleasant, yet complications follow.

She is fired, scratches around for a job, and finally finds one in a laundry. Then Mrs. Chambers seeks her out and brings her back to the beach shop with the promise of a future. Ricky is contrite for past grossness; Mike is affectionately patient. But Ruby won't think of herself as having to choose between them. She wants, for a while anyway, to remain open to experience.

If this outline sounds banal, I've made Nuñez's point. He doesn't want to sweep us away with twisty action: he wants us to react as if someone we knew were telling us about things that had actually happened to her. We wouldn't judge events in a friend's life on whether they would or wouldn't make a good film. He has written Ruby so gently, so comprehendingly, that she exists—in all her crystalline ordinariness. After Mike's first kiss, she writes in her diary, "It's a long time since I've had a kiss that made my lips hum." That's a disconcertingly simple confidence from a human being.

And Nuñez has cast Ruby perfectly. Ashley Judd, related to well-known country singers, understands Ruby completely and understands, too, that film acting is more internal than otherwise. Her face has no particular distinction, but it's a clear medium, a transparency, through which we can see the scares and resolves and attractions and aversions that are whisking around in Ruby.

In fact, Nuñez has cast the whole film perfectly, so much so that it's easy to overlook his skill. Allison Dean, Ruby's black friend in the beach shop, Felicia Hernandez, the laundry co-worker, Bentley Mitchum, the handsome, spoiled Ricky, and Todd Field, the dependable Mike, fit so snugly in their roles that the high quality of their acting may be ignored. A special note for Dorothy Lyman, as Mrs. Chambers, a lovely and markedly competent actress whom we all ought to be seeing much more often.

Nuñez's directing is exactly as unostentatious and clear as it ought to be. But the picture would benefit by being about five or six minutes shorter; he is so concerned with Ruby that he finds it hard to let her go. He's also concerned with the place. He showed long ago, in *Gal Young 'Un* (1979), that northern Florida is his turf. He is a self-described regionalist, and he wants to sing the problems and beauties of his region. Fine. It's a little early to equate him with Satyajit Ray, but what Ray did for Bengal, Nuñez could try to do for his homeland. With his quiet art, he deserves every chance.

Red and White, Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1994

(*The New Republic*, 13 June 1994)

In the 1960s the Swedish director Vilgot Sjöman made two films critical of Sweden, *I Am Curious, Yellow* (1967) and *I Am Curious, Blue* (1968), yellow and

blue being the colors of the Swedish flag. Lately the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski has made three pictures, *Red* (1994), *White* (1994), and *Blue* (1993), following the French national colors because, overall, most of the action in the trio is set in France. (Besides, if he wanted to make three pictures, the Polish flag is one color shy—no blue. Kieslowski has since done a lot of work outside Poland, some of it vacuously pretentious, as we shall see.) As per French lore, *Blue* is meant to deal with liberty, *White* with equality, and *Red* with fraternity. *Blue* was shown in the United States last year. *Red* just had its premiere at this year's Cannes Festival.

These films were preceded by a large reputation. Kieslowski's 1981 picture, *Blind Chance*, which I've not seen, is well-regarded by many. His *Decalogue* (1988), a ten-part work made for Polish television, has been hailed rapturously, and the one part I saw at the New York Film Festival had sober, cynical, mid-European enticements. But *Blue*, made in France, about the attractive young widow of a composer, was one of the most thoroughly irritating, arty bores I've seen in years—a nearly suffocating series of poses and attitudes about a composer's young widow and the man who finishes her husband's unfinished symphony. Moreover, this unbearable picture has little to do with the "liberty" that its title represents in the French flag.

Red itself, though, is highly enjoyable. This is almost a daring comment, plebeian and inadequate, because of the director's highfalutin aesthetic stances and the critical hoopla surrounding them. For its part, *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), about two physically identical young women, one French and one Polish, never achieved the metaphysical plane that the director and others claimed for it. Kieslowski then announced his trilogy to be based on the three colors of the French flag.

Now from this trio *Red* is being shown in the U.S. It has as little to do with the "fraternity" in the tricolor as *Blue* does with "liberty." But, if we disregard its supposed schematic obligation, it's a wistful, clever, engaging tale. Irène Jacob (who played the two Veroniques) is a University of Geneva student who accidentally hits a dog with her car. She carries it to its owner, a solitary, embittered, retired judge, Jean-Louis Trintignant. Jacob is having troubles of the heart; Trintignant, we learn, has not yet recovered from such troubles of long ago. Between these two, a tacit father-daughter affection grows. Neither of them says so, but her visits and his grudging reception testify to it. It has subtle charm.

Around their story is woven another story, a love affair, unconnected except that the two people's homes are in the neighborhoods where Jacob and Trintignant live. Their story, which has some parallels to the inner story, entails shock and disappointment, too. The ending settles everything, through an accident shown to be as arbitrary as falling in or out of love.

Kieslowski handles it all with velvet-gloved firmness and with a neatness that is ironic. His cast is excellent. In fact, if there were some touch of violence in

Red, it would be equivalent to upper-range Chabrol. The hyperbolic praise that Kieslowski has drawn seems uncalled for. Comparison with Chabrol is compliment enough.

White is very different, and much better. This time the approach is picaresque, wryly comic. A Polish hairdresser in Paris is divorced by his French wife because he is impotent, although he's still madly in love with her. She grabs their bank account. He gets himself smuggled back to Warsaw by an expert Polish bridge player who is returning after some French tourneys. In Warsaw the hairdresser finds a means to make money, goes into business for himself—not hairdressing, big business—and becomes really wealthy. He then spins a scheme for revenge on his wife, whom he still loves. The scheme brings about reunion and the end of impotence.

We have trouble sympathizing with this man's devotion to this cruel, grasping woman. Still, it doesn't seem humanly impossible. The screenplay zigs and zags every ten minutes or so with a new chapter, something like a Sacha Guitry film. Quite enjoyable. And Kieslowski's rendition of Polish life today—cleverness and swindle and financial gamboling—is fascinatingly candid.

He handles the whole film with the same mid-European cynicism that marked his earlier work, and he gets some flavorful acting from his principals. Julie Delpy is poutingly sexy as the wife. Zbigniew Zamachowski, doughy-faced, draws a Schweik-like character with a bit of ingenuity. The find of the picture is Janusz Gajos, the bridge expert, impressively taciturn, quietly sure: a sort of Polish Armin Mueller-Stahl.

Why *White* is itself a parable of equality, *à la* the French flag, I cannot see. It's blatantly a parable of vengeance.

***Il Postino*, Michael Radford, 1994** (*The New Republic*, 3 July 1995)

Il Postino (*The Postman*, 1994) is a touching Italian film that would be even more so if it were twenty minutes shorter. In the early 1950s Pablo Neruda was exiled from Chile for political reasons and, in 1952, spent some time in a villa on Capri. (The film gilds the facts. He was politically unwelcome in Italy. According to his memoirs, only an invitation from the historian Edwin Cerio, who offered him a villa on Capri, secured him a stay there. Not mentioned in the picture.)

This villa, according to the screenplay adapted from a 1985 novel by Antonio Skármeta, was in a locality where everyone but Neruda was illiterate. He was the only one in the area who received mail, and every day a postman bicycled up from the nearest village to bring the world-famous poet his letters and packages. A

friendship grows between him and the postman, with respect and humble dignity on the postman's part, with genuine response from Neruda. He helps the postman both with his efforts at poetry and with his courtship of the local beauty.

If the film had ended with Neruda's departure—recalled to Chile—it would have been a shapely little bittersweet story. But it's protracted into a political finish that has absolutely no connection, in narrative or tone, with what preceded it.

Michael Radford, who directed *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984) and *White Mischief* (1988) and who collaborated on this screenplay, kept the good four-fifths of the film in perfect balance. Franco Di Giacomo's camera lets the landscape ravish us. A further Italian treat for the eye is Maria Grazia Cucinotta, fiery and grave as the young woman. Philippe Noiret is Neruda, perfect in conjoined celebrity and reticence. (In *Cinema Paradiso* [1988] Noiret was dubbed in Italian. Perhaps here he himself spoke the lines, since Neruda would have had a foreign accent.)

But the best treasure is Massimo Troisi, the Neapolitan actor of theater and film who is the postman. By the 1990s he had achieved a position in Italy, along with Nanni Moretti and Maurizio Nichetti, as one of the leading Italian film artists of his generation. Troisi had heart problems; and, we're told, he died the day after the shooting of *Il Postino* was finished.

His performance would have been poignant anyway—a luminous face, a delicate surety of manner and speech. The fact that every day of filming took him closer to death obviously has nothing to do with art; obviously, too, it matters.

Smoke, Wayne Wang, 1995 (*The New Republic*, 26 June 1995)

In *My Dinner With André*, the Shawn-Gregory film of 1981, André tells Wally of his transfiguring experiences in far-off places. Wally replies:

Why do we require a trip to Mount Everest in order to be able to perceive one moment of reality? Is Mount Everest more real than New York? Isn't New York real? I mean, I think if you could become fully aware of what existed in the cigar store next to this restaurant, it would blow your brains out.

I can't say if Paul Auster knows these lines, but they could almost serve as epigraph for his screenplay of *Smoke* (1995), except that a cigar store is only one of the important places in the film and, as in Auster novels, the quest is for something more than reality—it's for parareality, the mysteries that underlie dailiness.

An easy comparison for this film (as for Auster novels) is to a jigsaw puzzle: the pieces are interesting chiefly because they foretell a larger picture they will combine to form. For instance, the cigar-store owner, Auggie, tells us that, five years earlier, a young pregnant woman stopped in for something. He gave her

exact change for her purchase. She left and, a minute later, was accidentally killed in a criminal shoot-out down this Brooklyn street. The tragedy crushed her husband, Paul, a novelist, who, five years later, when the film begins, has long been unable to write. Chatting with Paul, Auggie mourns the fact that he had exact change for Paul's wife that day. If only it had taken him a little bit longer to make change, if he had delayed her a few seconds ...

Yet—without implying that it compensates for Paul's loss—if he were not now alone, he would not have invited a vagrant black teenager to crash in his place for a few days. The invitation then creates twists that enable the youth, Rashid, to find the long-lost father for whom he has been searching. This is only one example of the film's interweavings; and, once we get past Rashid's superficial reminders of *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993), we see that his story and the others that it crosses are meant to dramatize a stark theme.

Patterns. All of us love patterns. Auster, in his fiction and in this screenplay, explores that love intensely. As in *The Music of Chance* (1993), which was exquisitely filmed two years ago, Auster shows us that patterns are not divine, but man-made. We find, we insist on finding, patterns in everything: tornadoes, auto crashes, slaughters in restaurants by maniacs with Uzis. But the blunt fact is that most experience, no matter how grotesque, is sooner or later absorbed into human history; and after that happens, we retrospectively find some point in the disaster. Or, if it's a bright eventuality, we find some deep prior justification for it. Auster shows us how our penchant for pattern-making cossets us in the midst of chaos.

The director, Wayne Wang, is, we're told, in some measure responsible for the screenplay. A few years ago, Wang read a Christmas story of Auster's on the op-ed page of *The New York Times*, sought out Auster, and suggested that they develop it into a screenplay. This they did, working backward from the original story, which is a wry account of how a deception made a Christmas cheerful. A theft in that story suggested a major segment of the finished film. (At the end of *Smoke* Auggie tells Paul that Christmas story. Paul doubts it. Then, under the closing credits, we see the story actually happening—in black and white.)

Wang is a Chinese-American whose first two films, *Chan Is Missing* (1982) and *Dim Sum* (1985), showed more promise than achievement. He made four subsequent pictures, of which I saw one, *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). There's no stylistic connection between Wang's previous work, which was at best good ethnic celebration, and *Smoke*, which is crafted with subtle artistic intelligence. As Philip Haas did with the previous Auster film, Wang immediately sets a tone that seems a cinematic equivalent of the author's prose: patient, considerate, companionable yet sharp. Amused, almost, as it watches the antics of human beings.

Early on, in the cigar store, Paul tells some of the cigar store's usual crowd how smoke can be weighed. In an arch way, that story is symbolic of the film—paradoxically—because it symbolizes absolutely nothing about the film, other than mankind's hunger for symbology as for patterns. Wang treats the episode with just the right mixture of gravity and wit.

Paul, here and throughout, is simple and strong. He is played by William Hurt, bearded and surprisingly excellent. The surprise is in the way that Hurt speaks Auster's lines, without his customary ponderousness and conceit but with true thoughtfulness, keen inflection. As Auggie, Harvey Keitel surprises, too. Instead of slicing off one more Keitel performance, saran-wrapped at the source, he looks for colors, shades, verity. Harold Perrineau plays Rashid with touching bravado, and Forest Whitaker is tremendous as his father. Stockard Channing has an easy part as a tough former girlfriend of Auggie's, but she avoids the usual clichés in playing toughies. Ashley Judd is vitriolic in her brief role as Channing's—and perhaps Auggie's—eighteen-year-old daughter.

The story has a few glitches. (How did Rashid's aunt find out that he was staying with Paul?) But they fade in the film's generally quiet embrace. The idea of quiet means much to Auster and Wang. Instance: the reunion of Rashid and his father at a country garage. It's stormy. Paul and others struggle to part the fighting pair. Cut. All the parties are now sitting around a picnic table behind the garage. Silence. Paul offers the father one of his small cigars. The father offers Paul one of his large ones. More silence. Cut. It's delightful. It trusts us to supply the unseen and unsaid, and we enjoy doing it.

***Angels and Insects*, Philip Haas, 1995** (*The New Republic*, 19 February 1996)

With his second film, Philip Haas proves that he really exists. His first, *The Music of Chance* (1993)—I'm speaking of fiction films; Haas had previously done documentaries—was delicate, intelligent, charged with reticent daring. But as admirable as it was, it guaranteed nothing about his future. More than one director has made a splendid début of a career that then failed to follow. *Angels and Insects* (1995) affirms that Haas truly has an artistic identity and that it is growing.

Even before we see his work, we know that he is engagingly bizarre. Not many directors would choose, as he did, a Paul Auster novel for a feature début; it has plenty of surface action, but its real action is buried. And now, for his second picture, Haas has chosen A. S. Byatt's 1992 novella *Morpho Eugenia*, from the collection titled *Angels and Insects*. Byatt's story is a mid-Victorian allegory. It slithers

ahead toward nothing so simple as a madwoman in an attic; it ends as a Jamesian revelation of soul-shivering moral anarchy beneath the green-lawns-and-tea-party decorum.

As in the earlier film, Haas collaborated on the screenplay with his wife, Belinda. (He is American; she is Belfast-born.) They begin more dramatically than Byatt does. The novella starts with a ball at Bredely Hall, the country house where William Adamson, a young scientist of working-class background, is an assistant to the head of the house, a middle-aged amateur scientist. After the initial splash of prettiness, we learn that William has lately returned from ten years in the Amazon country, where he lived among natives, learned their language, and risked his life to study local butterflies.

The screenplay reverses this order of discovery right in the credits. We see and hear Amazonian natives singing and dancing: the word “Angels” is superimposed. “And” occurs as we dissolve to a different kind of dance, the ball at Bredely, with the word “Insects” superimposed. If this is not subtle, still it fits Byatt’s forthright tone of symbolic pronouncement. (Her patrician family’s name is Alabaster!) In any case, the Haas reversal deepens our knowledge of William from the first moment and whets our appetite.

William’s employer is Sir Harald Alabaster, a rich clergyman who is a student of insect life. Lady Alabaster is fat and gluttonous. They have a grown son, Edgar, two grown daughters, and younger children. One of the older daughters, Eugenia, had been engaged, but her betrothed died and she is grieving. (Much, but not too much, is made of a coincidence. The two butterflies that William has managed to save after a shipwreck on his homeward voyage are of a species called *Morpho Eugenia*.) William, grimly aware of his poverty and class, nonetheless falls quietly in love with the pensive Eugenia. Watching him and her and a good deal more is Matty Crompton, a woman in charge of the younger Alabasters.

Despite William’s reserve, the romance between him and Eugenia blossoms and leads to marriage and children. These matters have gone forward over the insolent objections of her brother Edgar, who frequently and vilely reminds William of his poverty and low degree. Hovering throughout is the somewhat numinous figure of Matty. And, recurrently, there are insects.

William breeds moths and ants and butterflies and keeps journals. He takes the younger Alabasters on walks in the pleasant woods, overturning rocks and dead branches to show them the maggots and worms beneath. This symbolic implication continues, right through a scene in which a maid carries a bucket full of beetles up from the cellar of the great house.

Overarching these implications is a theme broached by Sir Harald in talk with William. The clergyman says he has lived from an age of religion, when good and

evil were clear, into an age of science—the Darwin-Wallace age—in which good and evil are less clear. The film's editor, Belinda Haas, counterpoints this contrast visually. Science gives us the insects, the facts beneath the rocks and branches; the editor interposes plaques of perfect Victorian life—the family fishing, playing charades, and so on. The very blandness of these scenes, the conscious basking in innocence, suggests shadows beneath.

One morning William rides to hounds with a hunt club. This is the first time we see him in a “gentlemanly” pursuit. Previously he has watched Eugenia riding with Edgar, and he usually glimpsed them through a window. Those two are not among the riders today. The hunt has gone only a short way, however, when a boy rides up to summon William back to the house. There he discovers the secret that shakes everything we have seen into cruelly sharp focus.

Who sent William the message to return from the hunt so that he could make the discovery? Matty later denies that she did it and says: “There are people in a house, you know, who know everything that goes on—the invisible people, and now and then the house simply decides that something must happen. . . .” The acceptance of this nineteenth-century mystique, the celebration of it, is what binds Byatt's novel in shape and what gives the film its ambience.

William flees the great house. And not alone. But what Byatt and the film leave untouched is what happens to those who could not escape, who were tied there for life by their lives. Still, this, too, can be seen as a facet of the moral drama. William's fate is to discover and to leave. The fate of the others is to remain.

The French cinematographer Bernard Zitzermann, who shot *The Music of Chance*, lights this film with extraordinary nuance. Sunlight is not smitingly bright, candlelight is not always enchanting. This palette wonderfully accommodates the film's climax—the peculiar rush of surprise that certifies what has gone before, not only in detail but in tone.

Among the principals, Jeremy Kemp, as old Alabaster, has the easiest role because the most naïve, but he steeps it in period texture. Kristin Scott Thomas shows previously unsuspected range as the somber Matty. Patsy Kensit's Eugenia seems somewhat amorphous until developments reveal the design. Likely to be undervalued, I fear, is Douglas Henshall as Edgar, the brother who seems to live by class arrogance, riding and drinking and servant-girl abuse. It is trenchant, purposeful acting.

Mark Rylance plays William with taciturn sensitivity. His William knows what he dare not hope for—Eugenia—yet must hope for. Our sympathy for him, earned and not tugged out of us, makes later events all the more disturbing. It takes nothing away from Rylance to say that the shadings of his character are in part a tribute to Haas's directing—which of course is true of the other actors as well.

***Trainspotting*, Danny Boyle, 1996** (*The New Republic*, 19 August 1996)

We've plunged into drug-addicted lives in just about every American city, and in London, Paris, Berlin, Helsinki, and Rome. Now it's Edinburgh. *Trainspotting* (1996) is so cannily dressed up with all the relatively familiar horrors that one can almost doubt its honesty of intention. It seems to be saying, "Oh, you think that Edinburgh is behind the times, do you? Well, just look at our junkies."

Except that many of us would not understand it if the film did actually say it. Most of the dialogue is spoken in thick Lallans, and less than half of it is comprehensible. (Oddity: Irvine Welsh's 1993 novel, from which the film is taken, is largely in that dialect, but John Hodge's screenplay, though spoken that way, is published in straight English.) A few patches are subtitled, but the general effect is of watching an opera without having read the libretto. We sort of know what's happening.

Not that it's highly interesting. The film opens with a couple of young men running from the police through city streets while the calm voice of one of the fugitives recites a quiet litany of the choices he has not made, the usual stuff of a comfy life. He is Renton, one of a small group of young men and women whom we now see living in the midst of grunge, while the baby of one of them crawls amid the discarded needles. Soon the baby dies of neglect by her addict mother, who screams with grief until she gets another needle.

Aside from some pub fights and occasional sex flings, the story centers, in its lax way, on Renton rising above his fellows. This he does at last in London by stealing the money that all of them have earned through a heroin sale. Renton moves on, to acquire, as he says, all the comfy stuff he derided in his opening monologue. Does this signify the bourgeois defeat of drug-supported idealism?

Danny Boyle, the director, begins with a touch of Richard Lester and the (running) Beatles, then moves on through so many reminders of earlier drug films that we sometimes feel he has moved his cast into settings and set-ups abandoned by predecessors. Even the occasional fantasy and comic scenes don't burst with originality. Except for Renton, the cast is largely made up of grotesques. The one pungent performance is of a sociopath, an alcoholic, not a junkie, played by Robert Carlyle.

The title, says A. L. Kennedy in a newspaper comment, "refers to the utterly pointless British hobby of gathering data on locomotives—a pastime that [Irvine] Welsh equates with the sad hobby of drug addiction." Thus the title is about as helpful to us as the thick dialect.

In the late 1950s, when the early plays of John Osborne and Arnold Wesker began to come to the United States, many Americans felt that, whatever gifts

these writers had, they were suffering from time-lag. We had discovered the proles as protagonists some twenty-five years earlier. For us, there was a slight, inevitable touch of naïveté about those plays. Not with *Trainspotting*. The people who made it knew very well that they were adding to a long line of predecessors. Except for its Scottish setting, they cannot have believed that they were doing anything more original in this kind of film than the next James Bond film will do in its genre. A new voyeurism has arisen in the last two decades or so, and *Trainspotting* caters to it—an addiction to addiction-watching.

***Sling Blade*, Billy Bob Thornton, 1996** (*The New Republic*, 10 February 1997)

Who is Billy Bob Thornton? The question fascinates after seeing *Sling Blade* (1996), the extraordinary first film that he wrote and directed and in which he plays the leading role. It's a question that I hope will engage many; I hope, too, that a good deal of the answer lies in his future.

Thornton, it turns out, is an actor I've seen (Jarmusch's *Dead Man* [1995], for instance) though I wasn't aware of it. He has frequently appeared on TV and has co-written several screenplays (with Tom Epperson). He is an Arkansas native—this film was shot in rural Arkansas—and seems to be about forty. Nothing in his biographical data predicts the complete success of this eccentric, engrossing film.

Its only real flaw, not trivial, is the title. In an age when Hollywood herniates itself every week trying to outdo last week's action-violence peak, *Sling Blade* is a misleading title. A sling blade does figure in the story—apparently it's what in my farm days was called a corn-cutter, a small scythe blade with a short wooden handle, which allowed you to cut corn with one hand while you gathered it up with the other—but we don't actually see the tool or its use. The story has two episodes of violence, essential to it. One of them takes place long before the film begins, the other is hidden from our sight. The bulk of the film is a generally quiet journey from one episode to the other.

Thornton plays Karl, a fortyish man who, at the start, is released from the Arkansas mental hospital to which he was committed when he was twelve for the murders of his mother and her lover. He had never been completely right in the head: his parents had treated him almost like an animal, making him live in a shed behind the house. But evidently this hadn't affected his affection for them. The accidental sight of his mother lying down with a man who, thought Karl, was hurting her had set him ablaze. Now, after some twenty-five years, docile and slow, he is judged socially viable and is released.

The head of the hospital, a decent man, finds him a job in a fix-it shop. Karl is a whiz at mechanical repairs—lawn-mowers, small appliances and the like—and he quickly proves his worth to his boss, who gives him a place to bunk in the shop. Karl has met a ten- or eleven-year-old boy in the town, Frank, the son of a widowed mother, Linda, who works in a supermarket. Karl and Frank like each other; Linda also likes Karl, gives him a cot in her garage, and he becomes almost a member of the family. However, Linda has a lover, Doyle, who is around a lot and is much less friendly to Karl.

The ending of the film is visible as soon as all the pieces are in place. The only surprise is that the manager of the supermarket where Linda works is gay, suffering the usual harassments of gay men in small towns. He, too, is a member of Linda's "family," and he, too, is disliked by Doyle. But predictable though the ending is, the film is not concerned about it: Thornton and company concentrate on the texture of the journey to that ending.

Actors love to play impaired people, mentally or physically impaired or both. Simulating impairment is usually easy and easily wins praise. Very quickly in this film Thornton convinces us that he is interested in Karl as a human being, not in showing how cleverly he can play a slow-speaking, slow-moving man. Thornton soon creates a conviction of someone resident in Karl. Caught within that pigeon-toed, slightly round-shouldered, jut-jawed figure is a whole man trying to signal to us. Reconciled to his immured condition, all he wants from the world is the chance to make others aware of his capacity for feeling. Thornton uses every physical aid that he can summon to create the sense that what we see is not the whole of Karl. The way his body falls on one foot after another as he walks, the near-grotesquerie of some gestures, are designed as a mime might do the role, Petrouchka without a theater.

But it's harder than mime, because Karl must speak. His speech is halting, never much varied in pitch or volume throughout his considerable range of emotions. Yet it is no metallic drone: it's the speech of a man for whom every word must be considered, brought forward, presented. Many of his utterances are followed by a small sound in his throat, as if in relief at getting the sentence out.

All these aspects are part of an individual, not a collection of effects. It's all the more impressive, then, to remember that Thornton also directed the film. (One odd moment: early in the film he glances sideways at the camera as he walks. I don't know why he left this shot in.) Members of the cast and crew have commented on the oddity of watching Thornton supervise the setting up of a shot, then seeing him step into Karl. Numberless actors have directed their own films. But the contrast between the acuity that a director needs and Karl's state of being is especially sharp.

Thornton's performance is so good that his directing may be slighted. His work is spare, suggestive, something like Hal Hartley's or Jim Jarmusch's. (Jarmusch plays a bit part in the picture.) For instance, Karl's first scene. We've learned that he's in this hospital and why, but we haven't yet met him. Then we see a patient sitting in profile in the foreground; next to him, facing us, is another patient telling him a story. Which is Karl? When it dawns on us that the silent one is Karl, we recognize that this is a director who understands space and focus. By being the silent one in this scene, Karl has forcefully "entered."

The cast is made up of professionals and others, but in Thornton's hands—a born neorealist—they come out even. Among the pros are Jimmy Hampton, as the hospital head, John Ritter, who plays the gay man with defensive dignity, and Dwight Yoakam, Linda's lover who saves up his meanness for when he is drunk. Lucas Black and Natalie Canerday are adequate as Frank and Linda. Robert Duvall has one scene as Karl's estranged father. (While *Sling Blade* was being made in Arkansas, Duvall was in a film being shot in Memphis, screenplay co-written by Thornton, and he came over for a day's work.)

Among the non-pros is Rick Dial, a high-school friend of Thornton, who plays the fix-it boss. Thornton has managed to evoke Dial himself on screen, which is fine. After Karl does his first little miracle of repair, Dial says, "I'll just be damned." That one word "just" verifies the man and the region.

Then there is—Part Three!—Thornton the author. Everything is so rooted, so immediate, that we ask the script to do little more than follow the course of some lives. But beneath the authenticity lurks a drama of fate. Here is a man condemned from birth to make his way through life enveloped in a caul of remoteness despite his plentiful feelings. Thus, deeply implicit in this unassuming film, as in all dramas of fate, is the question of design. If there is design in life, why this one for this man?

A few hours after seeing *Sling Blade* I couldn't remember if it was in color. Then I read in the press material that this was precisely Thornton's intention. He wanted to shoot it in color but with the effect of black-and-white—to use the latest techniques, I assume, but without showbiz. The production designer, Clark Hunter, not only "faded" the clothes, he over-dyed them in darker hues. The film's prop master, Dwayne Grady, said: "You have no idea how much red there is in the world until you try to avoid it." And Barry Markowitz's camera catches perfectly a visual scheme that hovers between two worlds just as Karl does.

A last word. The press is crammed these days with stories about the strangulation of serious filmmaking by high costs. Then along come exceptional talent and determination. *Sling Blade* was made for not much more than lunch money on a big production.

***Prisoner of the Mountains*, Sergei Bodrov, 1996**

(*The New Republic*, 24 February 1997)

In his later life Tolstoy thought all his fiction was bad except for two stories. One of them—recently filmed—was “A Prisoner of the Caucasus,” from 1872. (The other was “God Sees the Truth But Waits,” also from 1872, quite different in subject but similar in theme: enlightenment through captivity.) Well, it’s no news that artists are not always the best judges of their work. Not many Tolstoyans—a group that, I assume, includes every literate person on earth—would agree with the author. Think of “Master and Man” (1895) and “Hadji Murad” (1912), to speak only of his short pieces. One more oblique hint that Tolstoy’s judgment is questionable is that the Russian film made from the Caucasus story is in some ways more effective than the original so prized by him.

Prisoner of the Mountains (1996) was adapted for the screen by the film’s director, Sergei Bodrov, along with Arif Aliev and Boris Giller. Disregarding Tolstoy’s subtitle, “A True Story,” they have transposed the action from the Chechnya of 150 years ago, where Tolstoy did some of his army service, and have placed it in that general area today—or at least as it was before the recent Russian withdrawal. In this (unspecified) area the Russian army is simultaneously governing and fighting the Muslim population.

The screenplay demotes the central character, Vania, from officer to private and changes his companion from a stout dullish officer to a clever sergeant, deft and reckless. The two soldiers are captured in an ambush by raiding mountaineers. (Another change, for film convenience: these mountaineers speak Russian instead of their own language.) Their captor, Abdul, is a fiftyish man, stern and proud, who doesn’t kill his two Russian prisoners only because he hopes to exchange them for his son, a prisoner of the Russians. But the gist of the story is the sympathy that arises between Vania and Abdul’s thirteen-year-old daughter, Dina. Every day Dina brings the Russians their rations and is childishly, reticently, fascinated by Vania. He, for his part, is touched to delicacies of feeling that affect the outcome of the story.

This Dina-Vania bond, the relations between the two Russian prisoners, the moves by Abdul toward his son’s release and by the two Russians toward saving their skins, are all developed more fully than in the original version. The screenplay doesn’t windily inflate Tolstoy’s economy, for which his short fiction is celebrated; but the drama is more fully articulated—not least the Dina-Vania connection. These two are enemies, a fact that is never completely lost; yet, before long, he is whittling toys for her and she is wearing her best necklace when she brings the food. Nothing is forced: everything grows.

Bodrov, now forty-nine, has long been active in Soviet and Russian film, though I've never before seen anything of his. He made *Prisoner of the Mountains* in Dagestan, which is not far from Chechnya, mostly in a mountain village that is much the way it was a thousand years ago (except for Mozart and Louis Armstrong on the radio). And Bodrov deploys the huge gaunt mountains to make his film's title genuinely frightening.

Bodrov also uses the human scenery, so to speak. The faces. The people who live, like their ancestors for long generations, in this isolated, stubborn, struggling region. Dina is played by one of them—Susanna Mekhralieva, a schoolchild whom Bodrov found in the area, then gentled into a good performance. Almost all the smaller roles and certainly all the crowds are local people, who provide something more than verity. These are faces that were there before the czars and after, that survived the seventy years of the New Order. Thus, visually, Bodrov underscores his film with history.

The debonair sergeant is played by Oleg Menshikov, who was in *Burnt by the Sun* (1994), and who has some of the flair of Errol Flynn. The bumbling but forthright Vania is played by the director's son, Sergei Bodrov, Jr., in his screen debut. He is no bolt of histrionic lightning, but he is earnest; and his father proves with him, as with Dina, that he can get likable work from beginners.

The screenplay adds a few supernatural touches that are, oddly, more amusing than intrusive. Bodrov's entire film is, to put it musically, like a set of appealing variations on an old, simpler theme.

***The Sweet Hereafter*, Atom Egoyan, 1997**

(*The New Republic*, 8 December 1997)

Any film that provides Ian Holm with a large role is off to a good start. *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) gets off to that start and keeps going. Russell Banks's 1991 novel has been adapted by the director, Atom Egoyan, and—a pleasant surprise to one who hasn't been an Egoyan enthusiast—it has been done unsententiously, with no aesthetic preening. The novel was set in an Adirondack town; the film is set in British Columbia, possibly to help the financing in Egoyan's own country. Other than a change in accents, the move doesn't matter: what does matter is that Egoyan has "seen" the Banks story cinematically and has reshaped it adroitly—without altering the intrinsics. Banks told the story in five chapters, each written from one character's view. Egoyan has welded those chapters into a fluent whole, laced with essential flashbacks and accumulating in logical surprise.

The basic story is simple. One snowy morning a school bus, filled with children, skids off the road and into a lake. Most of the children are drowned. A

big-city lawyer reads of the accident, goes to the town, and tries to enlist some of the bereaved parents in suits against the town, the bus manufacturer, and possibly others.

This story is the means by which the film travels; the point of the traveling is twofold. The first theme, present from the very start, is love of children. In the truest, least saccharine way possible, *The Sweet Hereafter* rives us with the pain of parents' loss. The film begins with a statement of parental love, an overhead traveling shot, exquisitely photographed, of three sleeping people, a young mother and father with an infant between them. Just because the picture is so lovely, we are shaken when we learn later who the three people are.

The second theme is the idea of community, small-town community. We saw this theme lately in *Nobody's Fool* (1994) with Paul Newman; here it is quickened by the intrusion of an outsider, the lawyer (Ian Holm). We see, before he even gets to the town, that he himself is tormented by parental troubles: his twentyish daughter is a druggie who phones him to taunt and terrify him when she needs money. This wound in his life is, in a bitter way, an advantage, not just with the stricken parents but with us.

He needs it, this character, just as he needs the taciturn dignity with which he conducts himself, because, despite his apparent professional success, in this story he is an ambulance-chaser. He has gone to this town to solicit clients—out of a humane impulse, no doubt, but he hasn't been invited. Indeed he has to convince the sufferers that they ought to bring suit, and he doesn't succeed with them all. The climax of the story rests with an eleven-year-old girl who has been maimed for life and who acquires her own view of the legal proceedings.

Hovering over the whole town is this ache, the loss of the children. For the parents, this ghastly accident has seized feelings that, in the nature of nature, had been taken for granted and has twisted them into anguish. (One father, no angelic type, had followed the school bus in his car every morning waving to his two kids, who sat in the rear bus seat so that they could wave back. This man is the witness of the accident, helpless to do anything except summon aid that will arrive too late.) Egoyan, reticently and honestly, makes us feel that the whole town is haunted by lost loves.

His acute casting and gentle directing help to evoke something else that the town knew subliminally and now perceives: its kinship, heightened by the common tragedy. Particularly vivid among the actors are Bruce Greenwood as the tough father who used to follow the bus, Alberta Watson (who was the incestuous mother in *Spanking the Monkey* [1994]) as the motel keeper having an affair with Greenwood, Arsenee Khanjian and Earl Pastko as the "hippie" couple who adopted an Indian boy, Sarah Polley as the eleven-year-old, and Gabrielle Rose as the bus driver. Mild wonderment: at the end we see that she is a bus driver somewhere

else. How did she get another job? (Another mild wonderment: through much of the film Egoyan threads verses from “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.” Some of the lines strike home, but in Browning’s 1842 poem the children disappear because the town breaks its promise. No counterpart here.)

Then there’s Ian Holm. We meet the lawyer conversing with his daughter on his carphone, then visiting the townsfolk, but some of the most evocative material is in a flashback on a plane en route to the town. By chance he is seated next to a young woman (acted with gentle verity by Stephanie Morgenstern) who was a schoolmate and friend of his daughter. Without really questioning him, merely by her quiet concern, and by his tacit jealousy of her compared with his daughter, she gets from him the dreadful story of his daughter’s degradation—a story not yet finished, which he cannot stop and which he cannot help assisting. (How can he deny his daughter money when she needs it?) The writing and acting of those scenes on the plane add up to a Cheever short story in themselves.

Here and in his confrontations with the townsfolk, who are always initially hostile even if some of them become convinced about the lawsuit, Holm wins us with the way he uses his talent. He is not a florid actor, but he has learned how to make the most of his compact range. (How I would love to see the Lear that, I think, he is still playing in London.) He knows all that it is possible to know about a character he plays, and he manifests it through the personality of that character. No trickery or flash: just what every good actor achieves, reincarnation before our eyes.

The production designer, Phillip Barker, captures the wet-wool feel of wintry living. The cinematographer, Paul Sarossy, who has done three previous features with Egoyan, understands snow. This means a good deal more than knowing how to find all the colors in that seemingly solid white: Sarossy also understands the paradox of snow, its combination of confinement and liberation.

***Mother and Son*, Alexander Sokurov, 1997**

(The New Republic, 9 February 1998)

Heralded by critical trumpeting at an extraordinary pitch, Alexander Sokurov makes his American theatrical debut. (At the Film Forum in New York. Some of his work has been seen in the U.S. at special events, festivals and the like, but now he gets his first theater run.) This Russian filmmaker, forty-seven, has made fifteen documentaries ranging in length from ten to 249 minutes, and eight fictional features, about which there has been swelling celebration. At last, with his most recent feature, *Mother and Son* (1997), he is here.

Critical comment on this film has centered on its difference in purity from most of cinema, and the first minutes announce its heterodoxy. The opening shot,

seen at a slanting and softly distorting angle, is of a young man reclining next to his somnolent mother. It almost seems a still shot until, after a daring lapse of time, the young man smiles gently, then speaks to his mother. Almost inaudibly she replies.

This beginning fixes a good deal about the seventy-three-minute film that follows. Sokurov sets his tempo with us, almost like a conductor with an orchestra; he requests us to slow down from what we may consider true cinematic pace. He sets his lighting key, generally sepia and gray except for some patches of sunlight near the end. He sets the sound level of the dialogue, which is sparse anyway, between the only two people in the picture. (The script is credited to Yuri Arabov, but apparently the subject is the director's.) And he sets the closeness between the son and, as we quickly learn, his dying mother.

The story is easy to tell: there is none. When the mother says she wants to go for a walk, the son carries her out—the simple house is in the country—and puts her on a bench. He goes back into the house to get a book with some postcards in it to read to her. (It's typical of Sokurov's method that, while the son goes on his errand, the camera simply waits with the mother, moving slightly to welcome him back.) From the postcards we learn that the mother had an admirer and that she was a teacher. The son carries her back inside. She falls again into somnolence. The son goes outside again, walks through fields, sees a passing train in the distance, cries against a tree, goes back, and whispers to his departing mother that, as she has promised, they will meet hereafter. His last words: "Wait for me."

Obviously all the above describes an act of courage. Sokurov intended to discard, not flout, the usual filmmaking expectations in order to concentrate on poetic distillation. For this intent there can be only admiration. The problem is that the execution doesn't come up to the intent. Over and over again as I watched (which I did twice), I found myself holding almost desperately to his intent, his sheer intent, to sustain me through what seemed vacuous passages, rather than the implicative, charged ones they were meant to be.

Mother and Son becomes an object to be considered rather than an experience to be shared. Some reasons: the mother's almost continuous stupor throughout moves the film toward the clinical rather than the exalting. The one moment when the son has an outburst of grief, alone in the woods, Sokurov views in a very long shot, steady and cold. Anything blatantly lachrymose would have been destructive, but Sokurov's choice is frigid, almost proud of its frigidity.

Compare *Mother and Son* with a film in somewhat the same vein (not the same subject), *Through the Olive Trees* (1994), by the Iranian master Abbas Kiarostami. This is to compare ambition with realization. For Kiarostami, time and silence are instruments of generation. There is no such thing as nothing happening in Kiarostami's film: we are always enmeshed. Something is always happening even

when nothing much is seen or heard for long stretches. Gilberto Perez has said: “Kiarostami believes in beauty as he believes in truth, not as a conclusion but as an undertaking.” This perception is of use in illuminating Sokurov, who concludes rather than undertakes.

Much, too, has been made of Sokurov’s painterly eye (his cinematographer is Alexei Fyodorov), his attempts to integrate nature—“creation,” the son calls it—with the being of the characters. Quite apart from Kiarostami’s success in the matter, this integration was much more full in such an early antecedent as Dovzhenko’s *Earth* (1930), especially in the sequence of the old peasant’s death.

Still, it’s well to remember that *Mother and Son* is only one of the works of this unusual director. More would be welcome. At the very least this film teases the appetite.

***Funny Games*, Michael Haneke, 1997** (*The New Republic*, 23 March 1998)

Nationally speaking, European film history contains some baffling contradictions. Why do neighboring countries of comparable size, population, and cultural wealth have such different film records? Sweden has one of the oldest and finest film histories; Norway’s is negligible. Even more marked is the difference between Hungary and Austria (which once were politically united). In New York there has recently been a grand retrospective of Hungarian film at the Walter Reade. Such a festival of Austrian film is unimaginable.

Which makes a new Austrian film all the more odd. *Funny Games* (1997) was written and directed by Michael Haneke, a man in his fifties with large experience in theater, television, and film. No one could doubt his experience after seeing this picture. It was cast skillfully (the leading couple are bluntly unbeautiful, which, in its way, helps credibility). The pacing is careful and, one must say, fruitful: pauses produce effects. What is odd is that a director of Haneke’s dexterity and intelligence should have chosen a plot gimmick that is so worn.

Funny Games is a horror-thriller that begins with only a hint of trouble, a subtle one. A couple in their late thirties with a son of eight or nine are driving to their country place, and as they drive, they play opera recordings, in which husband and wife challenge each other’s ability to recognize singer and work. All is urbane, cultivated. This is before the credits. When the credits come on, the music changes to wild rock, changing back again to opera when the credits are over. Thus we know that wildness is lurking nearby.

They arrive at their luxe lakeside house, and soon they have a visitor, bland and polite. He is then joined by a polite friend of his. Now the family is held

prisoner—by two men who know all about their lives, neighbors, telephones, and so on. The two captors don't have robbery as a motive, just thrills. Having planned matters carefully, they are insinuatingly able to have their way.

If only this were the first, or fifteenth, time this gimmick had been used. The first instance I can recall of the bland turning baleful is a 1935 play called *Kind Lady*, which was subsequently filmed twice. A more recent example is Stephen King's *Misery* (novel, 1987; film, 1990). Once we recognize the genre into which *Funny Games* fits all too snugly, the chief remaining interest is in looking for any novelty that Haneke may have devised. He does come up with some shallow Pirandello stuff—interplay of fiction and reality. Several times, including the final shot, one of the captors addresses the camera, thus acknowledging our presence; and there is an incident with the remote control of a TV set, in which the film we are watching is reversed for a bit and done over differently, that is quite clever.

But this reality/fiction idea is mere décor, not central intent. (And Haneke permits some wide gaps in what is supposed to be an airtight plot.) The basic puzzle is why this sophisticated director chose this tired formula. Perhaps it was a holiday from his more serious work. Still, that doesn't make it a holiday for us. And it doesn't much help an overall estimate of Austrian film.

***Happiness*, Todd Solondz, 1998** (*The New Republic*, 9 November 1998)

It's a mite early to be summing up the twentieth century, but *Happiness* (1998) is so up-to-date that it deploys the past behind it. Todd Solondz's film wriggles and smirks and suffers and chuckles on a base of assumptions—about us. It seems to say: "Well, people of the nineties, see what this century has led to in love and desire and loneliness. And see what you're now willing to accept in a film about such things."

I missed Solondz's first film, *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), but *Happiness* very quickly displays finesse and control, colored by a nearly exultant glee. His screenplay goes on a bit long, but he has several stories to plumb, and he needs some space in which to knit them up.

The title is self-evidently ironic. Who today would expect the picture to be about happy people? Three sisters are at the hub of things, one of whom is not yet unhappy. The sunny one, Trish, is a New Jersey housewife with a psychiatrist husband, Bill, and three children, notably eleven-year-old Billy. Helen, unmarried, is a melancholy, self-dramatizing poet in Manhattan, inventing traumas in her past to feed her poems. Joy, who works in Manhattan and lives in New Jersey, also unmarried and hungry for love, is beating at the iron door of life with tiny fists.

Two of the three sisters, Helen and Joy, are central to their stories. For Trish, the colors of her life change, as husband Bill moves center in her strand.

Helen gets involved, via telephone, with a man who (unknown to her) lives in the next apartment. Joy, who teaches adult immigrants, gets involved with a Russian taxi driver, so tightly that his Russian girlfriend comes around to assault her. As Trish fades into the background of her story, Bill's problems take over. Successful professional though he is, he only now begins to face his homosexual leanings—pedophile, moreover—and begins to act on them.

Helen's neighbor is Allen, employed in a brokerage house, who comes home at night and drinks, makes obscene calls, masturbates; vulnerable, he succumbs to a plump woman across the hall who is even more desperate than he is. The parents of the three sisters, Lenny and Mona, live in Florida and are having their own emotional problems, as Lenny dallies with a middle-aged woman who lives nearby and is on the prowl.

Solondz does well with his cast, all of whom fill their roles to the brim. They breathe with some of the same sense of integration that Mike Leigh gets from his comparable London films, yet Solondz, as far as I know, doesn't put his cast through Leigh's long periods of character-saturation before shooting. Jane Adams (Joy), Lara Flynn Boyle (Helen), Cynthia Stevenson (Trish), Ben Gazzara and Louise Lasser as their parents, Rufus Read (Billy), and Phillip Seymour Hoffman (Allen) all deserve more praise than I am giving them. I cite only two of the cast specially: Jared Harris (son of Richard) shows unexpected solidity and strength as the Russian. Dylan Baker does a grave, contemplative balancing act—or unbalancing act—as the psychiatrist who knows he may be wrecking his life and can't stop it.

However, this catalog of desperations disserves the film in one way: it doesn't make clear that *Happiness* is a comedy, certainly black but nonetheless comic. Every one of these accounts of loneliness and frustration is tinged before or during or after with a hint of the author's amusement. Take the opening scene. The film begins with an immense close-up of Joy at a restaurant table, then a close-up of her escort (Jon Lovitz); and we then get dialogue of the subcutaneous, nerve-twisting, present-day comic kind in which Joy tells the man that she doesn't want to see him anymore. The scene is a neatly shaped verbal ballet of satire. But later we learn of the ghastly aftermath.

The comic texture of the scene and its ultimate shock typify the view that Solondz has of his film—and of his people: pitiable yet risible or, in this first episode, the other way around. There's a scent of Woody Allen in the air, but Solondz burrows through to bleak consequences more steadfastly than Allen.

This view that Solondz has of his characters makes us look at the film as a marker on the road. Emotional frustration is hardly a novel topic, but Solondz's

cool, wry view of his people fits the postmodern temper snugly. And it's remarkable that a recent documentary confirms the tone of his fiction. In *Unmade Beds* (1997) people talk about themselves in terms quite like those we find in *Happiness*. The love lives of four New Yorkers, male and female, have been chronicled in this work by Nicholas Barker who, through some wizardry, has induced these people to speak candidly; and it all comes out as a corollary to Solondz's film. The simultaneous appearance of these two pictures, made quite independently of each other, is eerily fascinating.

Solondz provides yet another ending-of-the-century marker: the sexual details. Curiously, the reviews of *Happiness* that I've read, all favorable, euphemize the frankest elements in it. This is to diminish its relevance, I think, but—a societal paradox—some reviewers can accept daring elements in a film and recommend that film to their readers, although they wouldn't be permitted to specify those elements in their publications.

Examples. Bill asks his son Billy, who is becoming sexually itchy, if he knows how to masturbate and, if not, offers to instruct him. Billy declines. (In the film world this is the Year of Masturbation. A chief gag in *There's Something About Mary* [1998] derives from it.) Bill subsequently drugs his whole family and Billy's sleepover friend so that he can sodomize the visiting boy. When the sodomy is discovered by that boy's physician and Bill is accused, Billy asks him if it's true. When Bill admits it, Billy asks wistfully if Bill will do it to him. (Bill, drawing the line, says no.)

Because of the scandal, Trish leaves Bill and takes her children down to her folks in Florida. Billy is on the balcony of the Florida apartment, sees a shapely young woman in a bikini below, masturbates, and, for the first time, ejaculates. (Thus, Solondz implies, taking his first step toward the ranks of love-and-sex frustrations.) Billy goes in to report his achievement proudly to his family at the dinner table. Meanwhile, the family dog licks Billy's semen from the balcony rail, then goes in and licks Trish's face.

What's most important about these franknesses, I'd say, is Solondz's belief that the audience would accept them and the fact that he has been proved absolutely right. (The first potential distributor declined the film; nevertheless, it's launched.) That acceptance is at the very least a drumbeat in the march of time, as the century winds down.

Supervening all these matters is the fact that Solondz is gifted. *Happiness* is not schlock by a crass sensationalist. It is the work of a talented man who knows his characters and his audience and, with more drollery than compassion, confronts one with the other.



Reviews of Documentaries

***To Die in Madrid*, Frédéric Rossif, 1963**

(*The New Republic*, 3 July 1965)

For many Americans who were born during the First World War, the Spanish Civil War was a baptism of internal fire/burning frustration. Mussolini's Ethiopian adventure was a humanitarian outrage and Haile Selassie prophesied accurately what our indifference to it would breed. The Japanese butcheries in China were horrible; still, Asia at that time was farther away than it is now. But Spain—Spain of the Popular Front and Pablo Casals, Unamuno and Picasso—that was another story. Here was progress in *our* world attacked by a group who candidly declared that they did not like the movement of the twentieth century and were determined to turn their country backward. Virtually helpless, we watched the course of murderous anti-history.

That war, and several others, are over; now more facts are in, more truth is out. Certainly an elected republican government was bloodily deposed by reactionary militarists, and a pro-Hitler government was installed that, essentially unchanged, is now pro-USA. None of that is forgotten; but what is most saliently commemorated in the documentary *To Die in Madrid* (1963) is that one million Spaniards—including plenty of women and children—were killed by both sides.

In those days we all went to see *The Spanish Earth*, a pro-Loyalist film made in 1937 by Joris Ivens with commentary and narration by Ernest Hemingway. This new film by Frédéric Rossif, a Frenchman, narrated by (among others) John Gielgud and Irene Worth, tries to be impartial. The shock is not in Rossif's impartiality but in our tolerance of it. The greatest blow to steadfastness is that, after thirty years, all massacres, by both sides, look alike. Franco is no less a tyrant, no less a clerical toady using the willing Spanish Church as an anti-democratic weapon; but perhaps his chief offense is that he won and ruled. For, in the course of the war itself, he had no monopoly on civilian blood and cruelty; he only had better allies.

Rossif has called his picture "a film of remembrance," and indeed what one feels in watching this well-assembled, vivid documentary is almost nostalgia. Not only because some of us were younger then but because things that then seemed either possible or impossible have since both proved otherwise.

***Hearts and Minds*, Peter Davis, 1974** (*The New Republic*, 15 March 1975)

Hearts and Minds (1974) is a documentary about American involvement in the Vietnam War, and it's the most important film on the subject—for an extrinsic reason. It's the first Vietnam documentary to be released in this country by a major distributor and thus can be seen in theaters by more people than any comparable film. Of course there were lots of TV specials, but though some were helpful, all were shorter and most were more guarded. (I know only one that was fine, Eugene S. Jones's *A Face of War*, from 1968.) Possibly Warner Brothers wouldn't have touched *Hearts and Minds* while American troops were actually in combat or in North Vietnamese prisons; still I think this timing is good, because of current questions about the use of force in other foreign difficulties and because of the shameful sloth among young people about Vietnam that has set in since the "peace" treaty.

How morally outraged they all were when their own skins (or their friends') were in danger. How slight the protest is now that only brown skins are being cut up. The casualty rate in Vietnam has by no means decreased, the U.S. has sent hundreds of millions in aid since the treaty, and President Gerald Ford wants to continue support of a putrid government that has thousands of political prisoners in indescribable prisons, but the former American protesters are now settled down and preoccupied, and since there is no immediate personal danger, no new crop has replaced them. To put the most cynical view, maybe Warner Brothers are distributing *Hearts and Minds* because they think it *won't* have any effect. If so, I hope it boomerangs.

You may have read of some legal fuss about the picture. Walt W. Rostow got a temporary restraining order against the film, later set aside by a higher court,

because of a segment of an interview with him. He is asked on screen for a review of his whole Vietnam position and he calls the question “goddam silly.” Presumably it’s only this phrase he objects to, not the treatment of his views, because, as the interview is woven through the film, his views are not even stated.

Hearts and Minds was directed and co-produced by Peter Davis, who made the disturbing CBS documentary *The Selling of the Pentagon* (1971). The co-producer was Bert Schneider, an interesting Hollywood figure, a partner in BBS Productions, which did (among others) *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). The film is a tapestry of interviews, newsreels, clips from Hollywood fiction films about war, and some footage in Vietnam shot specifically for this film. These are the more-or-less expected ingredients; the question is what has been done with them.

In what is by now the tradition of Vietnam documentaries, there are two basic aspects: the horrors of war as such, and the political/moral questions. On the first point, which is frighteningly easy to fulfill, the film gives us the awful catalogue: the villagers crawling through wreckage, the battered Americans and others on litters, the mourning over corpses, and the picture that has become almost archetypal—the little girl running naked down a road, her skin peeling after a napalm bombing. (Davis includes an ironic postlude I hadn’t seen before, a G.I. giving the child a drink from his canteen.) About these horrors, I can only repeat what I’ve said before: they don’t particularize anything against the Vietnam War. Pictures of burned Tokyo children in 1942 or burned Hamburg children in 1943 are just as horrible. Do they argue against the waging of World War II?

No, a film on Vietnam must answer political/moral questions, on the assumption that war is sometimes unavoidable in the face of powers that cannot be stopped except by force and that are worth stopping. *Hearts and Minds* flirts a little with the hawks and a little more with the doves, but it has no clear views and presents no participant’s views satisfactorily. No one could know from Rostow what the Lyndon Johnson rationale was. From General William Westmoreland, who looks and sounds like an aging Dick Tracy, there is only stupidity. From Nguyen Khanh (in Paris) there is a taped phone conversation with Ambassador Maxwell Taylor in 1964 in which Taylor urges him to abdicate power. This was because Khanh was leaning toward settlement with the North, but the film doesn’t say so. Daniel Ellsberg, posed against the Pacific, tells us that all our Presidents, from Harry Truman on, have lied to us, but he doesn’t tell us why or how. (Though he chokes up for us on the subject of Robert Kennedy’s death. I’ve read that at a Washington preview of this film, Ellsberg, a man I would like to like, choked up again at the sight of himself choking up.) One of the most direct political statements comes from Senator J. William Fulbright, who tells us about the lie of Tonkin Gulf, but not that he was one of those who swallowed it. (If the lie was so impenetrable, how

come that Senators Ernest Gruening and Wayne Morse, to their eternal credit, voted against the Tonkin Gulf resolution?) But these elements, and others, do not add up to a clear political history, objective or (as I would prefer) polemic.

Some moral matters are a bit clearer. A returned navy pilot, shot down and imprisoned for years, believes as strongly as ever in the rightness of what he did. Another pilot, also now living in the West, has had a change of heart and today deplores his former cool professionalism. In response to a question he says that the U.S. is trying not to learn from the war. I think this is true. “Learning” would imply an admission that no nation *qua* nation can make about its past behavior because it would inhibit future behavior *qua* nation. Hegel’s line needs to be rewritten: We learn from history that governments can’t afford to learn moral lessons from history.

The picture is generally well made. A few objections: a sequence with G.I.s in a Vietnam brothel seems irrelevant. Too often Davis uses the device of a waist-shot, repeated as the interviewee’s sequence is woven through the film, which concludes with the camera pulling back to show that the man is an amputee or paraplegic or invalid. A touch of cinematic hokum.

Hearts and Minds is not the summary statement it might have been, the film that demonstrates why things went wrong in Southeast Asia from the end of the Second World War—which means French influence on the U.S. against Ho Chi Minh and American receptiveness to that influence—and how the initial missteps led to the quagmire. Still I’m glad that the picture was made and will presumably be widely available. It’s a fairly forceful reminder of inadequacies in American character (how far is Watergate from Vietnam?) that are certainly no better than they were.

Roger & Me, Michael Moore, 1989 (*The New Republic*, 12 March 1990)

In Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), a character says: “Where are all these poor people I keep hearing about? I go to a lot of parties, and I never meet any of them.” Michael Moore, a young American, is making sure that we meet some. *Roger & Me* (1989) is Moore’s documentary about the effect of the General Motors (GM) plant closings in Flint, Michigan, in the mid-1980s.

After the closings Moore tried to get in to see Roger Smith, the head of GM in Detroit, to invite him to Flint for a look at what had happened to people there. Moore never got near Smith, so he made this documentary instead, at the end of which he at least succeeds in getting a brush-off from Smith at a public meeting.

Moore, who grew up in Flint and is the son of a GM worker, tells his story with dry wit. His soundtrack commentary sounds a bit like Garrison Keillor in

a dreadful situation. But much of the time he lets the facts and people speak for themselves. When I was a boy doing farm work and was taught to chop wood, I was told to let the fall of the ax itself do most of the work. This is Moore's attitude toward his material. He rarely underscores. Mostly the weight of the sequence does the job: the shrugging statements of the plump sheriff's assistant who executes thirty evictions a day; the flatulent pronouncements about the future at a posh Flint golf club; the blitherings of the Mayor and Governor and p.r. stooges about the resurgence of Flint; the wild fantasy of the millions invested—and wasted—in a new hotel and a theme park to turn this distraught city into a tourist attraction; and much more. (It's been noted that some of the events in the film are out of chronological order. Still, as Moore says, "everything that took place in the 1980s was a single blow" to Flint.)

The unemployed in this virtually one-industry city are not quite classical victims of a capitalist cycle. Moore tells us that during the time he covers, GM opened eleven plants in Mexico, so it's a shift of capital that has occurred rather than the arc of boom and bust. What he doesn't explore is the intelligence of American auto industry management, which dominated world markets for so long that it couldn't see, or couldn't believe, or couldn't adequately deal with, the invasions of foreign cars. The move to Mexico from Flint was apparently a belated attempt to lower costs by coolly shifting to a cheaper labor market and abandoning a loyal, dependent local labor force. Anyway, it doesn't seem to have helped a great deal. Recent newspaper reports on American auto industry production efficiency and advances in design are not sanguine.

Doubtless GM has its own version of the events in Flint; doubtless too they have the means to publicize it. Meanwhile, Moore, with somewhat smaller means, has presented in a sardonic film the plight of those with even smaller means.

In all the flap about *Roger & Me*, however, one odd fact has been scanted. The United Auto Workers (UAW) union is distributing copies of some of the film's adverse reviews. So, too, may General Motors, but since Moore's film investigates the hardships caused by GM's plant closings in Flint, Michigan, its action would be understandable. The UAW, however, often issues broadsides of its own about plant closings; why its opposition to this film sympathetic to workers?

Can it be because the UAW objects to the (widely noted) chronological rearrangements and compression? No, a union spokesman states different objections: the UAW thinks that its president, Owen W. Bieber, is shown as relatively unconcerned about the closings and lay-offs. Also, it isn't happy about Moore's friendship with dissidents in the union who oppose Bieber. In fact the film contains only one quite brief shot of Bieber, speaking vaguely about the Flint situation, and one shot of an apparent dissident voicing his opinions. Any other of Moore's friends who may be in the film are not identifiable as Bieber opponents or union dissidents.

But even if there were more of these opponents, what strangely focused reasons these are for a union's objections to a film that investigates the harsh treatment of union members—and that also memorializes the very founding of the UAW in Flint after the great sit-down strike of 1937. We even get a glimpse of the historical marker outside a GM plant commemorating the strike. Can there be other motives for the UAW's objections to *Roger & Me*?

Some speculations. Millions more will see this film than ever read UAW broadsides, millions in the car-buying public. By now the UAW is chained willy-nilly to the American auto industry and may feel that, in the clutch, it must support that industry even when it treats workers ruthlessly, even when leaders of that industry have been egregiously myopic. Those leaders were notoriously slow in responding to the foreign-car invasion, which was successful because of foreign-car design and quality. How many millions of American cars have been recalled by their makers in recent years? How many hundreds of thousands even since *Roger & Me* was released?

Yet the UAW is shackled to those American leaders, men whose dim-wittedness is now a commonplace subject in business columns. In *New York Magazine* of February 12th, Christopher Byron writes of GM and another giant, IBM, that after a decade in which they invested \$100 billion, "they have little to show for it except ordinary products, weakening stock prices, and a litany of excuses for having missed out on the longest and strongest economic expansion in the history of American business." Byron adds that "last month, two of the largest institutional investors in the country ... independently wrote letters to GM's board members complaining about managerial drift under [Roger] Smith"—the GM chairman of the film's title.

But what can the UAW do? Relocate in Sweden or Germany or France or Italy or—dread word—Japan? (A sign in Flint reads, "Buy American or ask for Japanese welfare." Much more defeatist than protectionist.) The union, broadsides or no, is absolutely laced to GM management for good or ill, and lately management's stupidities have made it more ill than good. *Roger & Me*, occasionally heavy-handed though it is, brings those stupidities to widespread attention—and could conceivably increase the public's interest in foreign cars. So, a bit pathetically, the union tries to dissuade the public from seeing the film.

Orson Welles: *The One-Man Band*, Vassili Silovic & Oja Kodar, 1995 (*The New Republic*, 6 & 13 January 1997)

The more we learn about Orson Welles, the sadder his story becomes. In 1994, Oja Kodar, the Croatian woman who was his close companion in his later years, opened a vault of long-stored Welles film footage in Los Angeles. Together with

a Slovenian director, Vassili Silovic, and a German producer, Roland Zag, Kodar assembled a ninety-minute film from that footage. (The Film Forum in New York had the U.S. theatrical premiere.) This film is heartbreaking in its unfulfillments, irritating in its idlings, ghastly in its losses, and laced throughout with magic, literal and beautifully figurative.

Orson Welles: The One-Man Band (1995) contains japeries, conjuring acts (Welles was famous for these), shards of abandoned projects, remnants of completed but lost ones. The materials are bound together with excerpts from a Welles appearance before American film students in 1981 after a showing of *The Trial* (1962). With these students he plays his favorite late-life role: the thwarted genius full of wry rue.

The real rue is that he was a genius, beginning with his very presence. With the sole exception of John Barrymore, I know no American screen actor, not even Marlon Brando, who so immediately seizes an audience just by appearing—before he begins to do whatever there is to perform. And Barrymore was not, as Welles was, a writer and a director. (A director? At his best, one of the best in world film history.) This new assemblage, like other posthumous Welles films and like some writings about him, calls both our culture and Welles himself to account. How could the theater and film worlds of America and Europe have been so wasteful of him? How, early in his career when he was showered with adulation, could he have done so much to discourage it? How could he so early have accepted the position of outcast? True, *The One-Man Band* shows more vividly than previous accounts how he attempted to work, how he fought against idleness. But it was a fitful fight. His slide into gross obesity was a patent surrender.

In this new compilation the reasons for making some of the bits are not given. One sketch shows Welles as the naïve American client of two snooty London tailors. Another sketch is a mockery of an English stately home. Another shows him drooling outside a pastry-shop window (Demel's?) in Vienna. In yet another sketch he really does walk around in the get-up of a London one-man band, addressed by a bobby, a housewife, and a flower vendor, all played by Welles. These snippets are fairly painful private jokes.

But there is more. Though there are no excerpts from the nearly completed *Don Quixote*, there are several from *The Other Side of the Wind*, Welles's last work, which, we're told, was virtually completed but is blocked by legal tangles. On the basis of these excerpts, it's possible to say only that they are quite unrelated to previous Welles styles. These glimpses are done with whirling cameras and stroboscopic cutting and with a sexual explicitness previously unseen in Welles. But nothing reliable can be inferred about the last film from these clips.

The pearl that makes this compilation invaluable is some footage that, I think, has been generally unknown. Around 1970 Welles prepared a forty-minute version

of *The Merchant of Venice* for television. (Presumably just the Shylock scenes—something that had been done in American theater by Maurice Schwartz in the late 1920s.) We're told that after Welles had finished shooting and was about to start editing, the negatives vanished. Only a fragment remains, some of the scene in which Shylock leaves his house and bids his daughter to guard it. Welles, in full make-up and costume and with a touch of Jewish accent, plays broodingly, powerfully. Ten years or so later, for some reason, Welles filmed himself, without make-up, without accent, in a trench coat, doing Shylock's great speech ("Hath not a Jew eyes?"). Fragment though it is, it is more fully accomplished than all of his *Othello* (1952) and his *Falstaff* (1965). It is a glorious moment.

In 1958, after the British premiere of *Touch of Evil*, Welles wrote a letter to the *New Statesman* about their review. This letter, not often acknowledged by biographers or critics, is a threnody on the conditions of filmmaking. First, he talks about the film artist's freedom. Responding to the charge that his picture is "a muddle," Welles says:

This is understandable in the light of the wholesale re-editing of the film by the executive producer, a process of re-hashing in which I was forbidden to participate. Confusion was further confounded by several added scenes that I did not write and was not invited to direct.

Rhapsodists about every frame of every Welles film don't often mention this interference. Then he addresses the reviewer's comments on his choice of subject. "I have to take whatever comes along from time to time, or accept the alternative, which is not working at all."

This new account provides a good measure of Welles's struggle to forge his own work, instead of waiting for "whatever comes along from time to time." Yet it also suggests that there was a streak in him, certified by biographers, of a longing for exiled superiority. The extraordinary artist relished, or came to relish, lolling in that easy chair before those students, basking in their adoration of a spirit too fine for this world.

***Looking for Richard*, Al Pacino, 1996** (*The New Republic*, 7 October 1996)

Al Pacino has appeared in several theater productions of *Richard III* (1592), and in *Looking for Richard* (1996) he shows that he is still working on the play and the role. Pacino directed this film and co-wrote it, insofar as it is written, with Frederic Kimball; and he co-produced it with Michael Hadge. Nominally it's an attempt

to explicate the play to those terrified of Shakespeare, terrified of understanding Shakespeare. As explication it's dispersed, discursive, capricious, wild, but as an outburst of energy, an actors' holiday for Pacino and a lot of friends, including some non-actors, it's highly engaging.

The film opens and closes with a panning shot of The Cloisters, the medieval museum at the north end of Manhattan where some of it was shot, while a voice—not Pacino's—gives us Prospero's "These our actors" speech from *The Tempest* (1611). And there's a neatly droll scene with Shakespeare "himself" just after the opening shot and another just before the closing one. Between these two sets of parentheses the film cavorts, crosscuts, and cartwheels, through rehearsals of *Richard III* blended with discussions and arguments among the cast, a visit to the rebuilt Globe Theatre in London and to Shakespeare's birthplace, snippets of interviews about Shakespeare with Vanessa Redgrave, Derek Jacobi, Kenneth Branagh, John Gielgud, and a couple of Shakespeare scholars, as well as sidewalk interviews with passersby wherever Pacino happens to be shooting.

All this is made more or less cogent by a nimble team of editors headed by Pasquale Buba. Omnipresent is a score by Howard Shore that is not always helpful. (A heavenly choir while Richard woos Lady Anne next to the corpse of the husband whom he has murdered? Churchiness, even if satirically intended, during one of the most scathingly psychosexual encounters in all of Shakespeare?)

Some scenes are shown in a bit more than fragmentary form—the murder of Clarence (Alec Baldwin), the dismissal of Hastings (Kevin Conway, who is notably solid), Bosworth Field—but mostly we are showered with Shakespeare confetti while voice-overs and a few titles try to clarify this "search" for Richard. Paradoxically, it's the confetti feeling that keeps the picture entertaining, its high spirits that are maintained even with this dark subject: the comments, outbursts, jokes of the actors and the others involved. (At one point, off-stage but not off-camera, Baldwin says: "We're doing this for forty dollars a day and all the doughnuts we can eat.")

We may wonder why there's all this fuss about clarifying one of Shakespeare's less complex plays, an investigation that went on over several years, that was returned to again and again when the necessary people were available. (We see Pacino shaved, unshaved, and bearded, all intermixed.) One reason is that Pacino could afford to do it, doughnuts and all, and had lots of friends who wanted to join him in a sort of wacky busman's holiday.

But textual explication doesn't seem to me the basic reason for this film. It's a very slim gloss of the play; if Pacino does Richard on stage again, this picture would be of limited use as a two-hour program note. The real reason for the film seems to be that Pacino is, as actor, unsatisfied with film acting alone and with a filmic reputation. It's not just that Hollywood won't let him do Shakespeare on

film: he also does other playwrights when he returns to the theater, and he's not permitted to do them on film either. *Looking for Richard* advertises, to the many millions who know Pacino only as a film star, the range of his acting ambitions, a range that most of his fans don't know.

I saw his Off-Broadway début in 1968 and have seen several of his subsequent theater appearances, but not his Richard. The fragments of it visible here show a mixture of styles from nudge-in-the-ribs vernacular to a touch of the grand. What his whole performance might be is hard to say. In any case, this romp-and-tribute is unique: I know of no previous instance in which a film star wanted to assure his film public that he was more than a film star.

Reviews of Books

***Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments*, James Agee, 1958** (*The New Republic*, 1 December 1958)

James Agee died three years ago of a heart attack at the age of forty-five, and it is not facetious to wonder how he lasted as long as he did. Rage and love and disappointment and hope against hope had flared so hotly in him that only a man with the physical tenacity of the devoted intellectual could have endured it for forty-five weeks, let alone years. His film criticism, the present instance of his rage and love, he had forsaken some years before his death for screenwriting, some of which he did superbly; but the change of occupation could not have brought him much nearer the perfection for which he stubbornly ached.

Following the posthumous success of his novel *A Death in the Family* (1957), this volume appears, containing every film review he wrote for *The Nation* (1942–48), a selection of his anonymous reviews for *Time* in the same period, and various film articles he wrote for *Life*, *Partisan Review*, and *Sight and Sound*. To dispose of some small objections at once, I think that none of the *Time* pieces should have been included, that the photographs weakly attempt to illustrate a book which would have been better off without illustration, and that the incidental drawings are lamentable. Agee's occasional misprints are retained along with the corrections in subsequent articles in a presumable (and dubious) effort to give an air of

immediacy. No editor is credited so there is no one to indict for these matters or for the inadequate introductory note and section headings.

The specialist reaches for a book like this automatically but the general reader wants to know why he should bother to read reviews of movies long gone, no matter how well written. Well, few general readers will be interested in every word here, but many will be moved by the central figure that this book creates: that of a man of sensibility and mind putting every nerve and brain cell, every memory and hope, completely at the disposal of a major contemporary art and passing on to us, as through a literary cardiograph, the effect on him of that art. Thus he provides us with a picture of the horrors and aspirations of an age, and of the torment and vision of an explorer who dares to leave the cozy nest of acceptances.

That is a large statement but not hyperbolic. See, for substantiation, his three-part review of *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), his essay on the Hollywood Ten, his review of *Man's Hope* (1945). Consider, too, the vein of his comments on war pictures, written *during* the war. This was published in July 1944, about the Russian documentary *The People's Avengers* (1944):

[Norman Corwin's voice on the soundtrack] has, it seems to me, a slightly officious resonance, and I don't think he should be forgiven the remark "One down" when a German sentry falls dead, or the remark "Reluctant superman" as partisans drag a frantically abject German soldier from his hiding place in a haystack. (Just before this shot ends or is cut, by the way, there is a sudden clenching of people round the prostrate soldier, ambiguous but horribly suggestive, which makes the crack still more off color, and tempts me to wonder how global the anthology of post-war atrocity films might be if every nation has the historical conscience to preserve its stock.)

I submit that, particularly in view of its date, this passage reveals something more than mere courage.

What was Agee's stature as a critic? The best critic is one who illuminates whole provinces of an art that you could not see before, who helps to refine the general public's taste (which is never good enough—they haven't time, they're busy studying something else or doing their jobs), and who serves as a sounding board for serious artists. (This last word is a drastic need; for instance, many serious writers work for years in this country without one valuable piece of criticism, even though they get many reviews.) But fundamentally you take a critic's hand and let him lead you further, perhaps higher, only if you are initially convinced of a substantial area of mutual sympathy and interest.

For me, then, despite his rare virtues, Agee is a deficient critic. We have a large basic disagreement. At bottom he has, I believe, little regard for or understanding of the art of acting; indeed, throughout this collection there are numerous references to his preference for well-directed non-professionals as against actors.

This, to me, is a blindness, a literalness puzzling in a man of his imagination. Admittedly, some movie faces can never be accepted as what they're playing but only as idol-image movie stars, but this is true of the Gary Coopers, not the Alec Guinnesses. It is the fault of the specific actor, not the art of acting. The fact that fine directors like De Sica have made memorable films with non-actors doesn't really prove Agee's theory. *Umberto D.* (1952), moving as it is, would have been infinitely better with a good actor in the title role. To succeed with the amateur cast is a remarkable stunt, at best; the same picture with good, appropriate actors could not help being better.

Further, many of Agee's comments on actors seem to me unperceptive. A few examples: He does not, in my view, recognize the vocal shortcomings of Olivier (a not invariably excellent actor) in *Henry V* (1944). He can write about a competent but commonplace *farceur* like William Demarest: "His performance in [*The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944)] stands ... among the finest I have seen." He says of the whole cast's readings in the film of *Hamlet* (1948): "I don't feel that much of the delivery is inspired; it is merely so good, so right, that the words set loose in the graciously designed world of the screen, like so many uncaged birds, fully enjoy and take care of themselves." This seems to me the compensation in ecstasy of a man who knows very little about acting and feels guilty because he isn't genuinely interested.

Paradoxically, his greatest asset is passion: he takes films seriously as such, cares greatly about them, what they are doing and where they are going. His reviews are more personal and social statements than they are, in the purest sense, art criticism, and they are strong statements. Yet even in social interpretation he can be argued with. For me, he completely misses the point of *The Notorious Gentleman* (1945), which, after four viewings, I think a valuable social commentary (as well as a good work of art). But his reactions flame; his passion—more moral than artistic—really burns.

The *Time* pieces should have been omitted because they are not the work of the full man but of the Luce employee. There is no quarrel, obviously, with a man's earning his living, but one need only compare his *Time* and *Nation* reviews of *Down to Earth* (1947) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1947) to see when he was being deft at his job and when he was being Agee. His famous *Life* article on the silent-film comics is a blend of both qualities.

The sternest criticism that can be made of these collected articles is that, from them, emerges not so much a critical intelligence or a Promethean appreciator of an art as a lovable and admirable man. Sometimes his lines soar; sometimes they merely gush. Sometimes his rhapsodic stabs penetrate to the heart; sometimes they flounder. He is given to meaningless distinctions. ("*Verdoux* is not the best of Chaplin's films, but it is the most endlessly interesting." The better ones were less

interesting?) But he had what is missing from most criticism today—of films and all arts: fierce intensity. The bitter image he leaves is not of a facile, corrosive cynic but of a blazing pessimist.

The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture, Robert Warshow, 1962 (*The New Republic*, 22 January 1962)

Robert Warshow died in 1955, aged thirty-seven, taking with him a serious mind and a valuable disrespect for acceptances. A number of his essays and reviews, mostly from *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*, have now been published under the title *The Immediate Experience* (1962), and the collection underscores the pathos of his early death.

Warshow was one of the best of a school of literary, theater, and film critics that has risen in this country since the thirties. A composite member of this school might be described thus: His liberal arts education has had a strong salting of applied psychology and the social sciences. His political views, if he still has any, are post-collectivist (he is through with Socialism and/or Communism). He is agnostic, yearning towards atheism. He spends much of his professional time attacking pap and by now is faintly tired of the sound of his own voice. His chief occupational hazard (of which he is well aware) is boredom.

The vast increase in collegiate education in the first third of this century produced a new class of unemployed: intellectuals looking for occupations. Whether or not they found academic or other posts to support them, they needed fields of their own for intellectual activity. Some of them found still further crevices to fill in the literary monuments to James, Melville, and Eliot. Others of them noted that most serious criticism of the theater had been feverishly aesthetic or nostalgically sentimental; as for films, American serious criticism before 1930 was minute. Their literary-sociological kits slung on their shoulders, they descended.

They had found their jobs. The theater attracted principally those whose bent was more literary than social. The others pressed on, naturally enough, to films, which seemed designed for them by providence—plentiful, popular, influential. The new critics could even start with the disarming, manly admission that they were not “above” films, that they had enjoyed them since they were children, including the bad ones. (Warshow: “I have seen a great many very bad movies, and I know when a movie is bad, but I have very rarely been bored at the movies.”) Here was the perfect medium to match their educations and temperaments, a lode of sociological meanings waiting to be mined.

Warshow shared the group's heaviness: the preponderant use of scientific and literary disciplines to evaluate a non-literary art; the conscientious response to humor (the more slapstick the more revealing, of course); the compulsion to invent seeming perceptions even when the critic perceived nothing. He shared their virtues: vigor of mind, hatred of fakeness and sentimentality, lively antennae fixed to considerable cultivation in the past. He had, too, some qualities less common in the group: genuine humor (as distinct from sarcasm) and some sense of shortcomings. Very possibly (we'll never know), the ability to grow.

The juxtaposition of social essays and art reviews in this book highlights Warshow's strengths and lack of them. We soon see that, not only is he on surer ground with social matters, but that when he writes of art he seems not to have changed subjects. Obviously two essays by the same author must reflect him, whatever the subjects; but no one can go (for example) from *To the Finland Station* (1940) to *The Wound and the Bow* (1941) without finding a different Edmund Wilson.

Warshow's essay on the Rosenbergs' letters is an adroit, scathing exposition of the interior of the Communist Party mind, with every iron plate riveted in place and the whole chamber ringing with metallic echoes. His piece on Dr. Wertham and comic books neatly skins the obstreperous concern of those psychiatrists who find a battlehorse on which to ride to headlines. His essay on E. B. White and *The New Yorker* is a useful corrective. (He says: "*The New Yorker* has always dealt with experience not by trying to understand it but by prescribing the attitude to be adopted toward it." For examples of this distinction, compare Richard Rovere's "Letter from Washington" in that magazine with his articles in the London *Spectator*. The former provides knowledgeable dinner-table chat; the latter are fine political surgery.)

But when Warshow moves into art criticism, he begins to weave and stumble, even in literature, which is relatively close to him. Comparing Lionel Trilling's novel with Forster's novels, he becomes clumsily involved. "Mr. Trilling might have come closer to the 'essence' of the experience he describes if he had been more willing to see it is as the experience of particular human beings in a specific situation; perhaps this means: if he had been more willing to face his own relation to it." Further: "Mr. Trilling has not yet solved the problem of being a novelist at all." The comparison ponderously discovers something that many of us knew: Forster is a novelistic genius; Trilling is not.

With plays and films Warshow is progressively less comfortable. His general essays on cultural aspects of certain film forms are enlightening. "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" is acute; his related essay, "The Westerner," is the best I have read on that much-munched subject. But when he criticizes specific plays and films, Warshow is simply inadequate. He is blind without his sociological glasses and, in turn,

is blinded by them when he looks at art as such. His divination of artistic purpose is dubious, his familiarity with artistic process is slight, his knowledge of directing and acting (hardly irrelevancies in this field) is non-existent. He criticizes *Death of a Salesman* (1949), as have others, for Miller's glibly assumed "liberal" response by the audience. Warshow's criticism of the play *as such* consists only of impatient rhetoric and poor jokes. His comparison of the film with the play fumbles the real reason for the film's failure: the fact that this play *is* its form—it cannot be successfully adapted to another medium.

In his review of *The Crucible* (1953) Warshow says that Miller's point is obscure and seems to be only a parallel (admittedly strained) with the McCarthy investigations. The central issue of the Salem witch trials, says Warshow, was that the accused "were upholding their own personal integrity against an insanely mistaken community." But surely that is the very point of Miller's play.

Warshow's remarks on acting are impoverished. In one place he calls Fredric March "a more commonplace actor" than Lee J. Cobb. March can be criticized on several scores, but they are all excesses—precisely part of the flavor that keeps him from being commonplace these days. (And in relation to Citizen Cobb, of all actors!) But Warshow's comments on acting reduce, generally, to one comment. Of March: "In the blankest moments ... one sees, if not Willy Loman, who is always more a concept than a human being, at least the actor Fredric March, brought so close and clear that his own material reality begins to assert itself outside the boundaries that are supposed to be set by his role." Of Chaplin: "Perhaps it could even be said that in some sense he has never been an artist at all—though he is full of arts—but always and only a presence." These statements exemplify this critical school's compulsive sagacity, hollow but high-sounding; and they demonstrate Warshow's stupefaction with the powerful juju of photography.

With the three Chaplin films he discusses, Warshow takes us through the social implications of the Tramp, and his changes into the Dictator and Verdoux and Calvero. Some of this is interesting; all of it conforms to the protocol of the ritual cultural essay on Chaplin. Compare these Chaplin pieces with Agee's three-part review of *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) and you see how little Warshow has said about the films as films. One does not wish that Warshow had been Agee. There is plentiful room for more than one kind of critic, and socio-intellectual attitudes are obviously a valid area of criticism. But Warshow's reviews remind us inescapably of the medical student who prepared for an exam by studying the stomach, was asked about the heart, and replied: "The heart lies near the stomach. The stomach is constructed of ... etc., etc."

Warshow seems to have had a growing awareness of a new dimension he wanted in his work. In a prospectus for a book he hoped to write on a Guggenheim grant, which prospectus serves as preface to this collection but does not really

apply to it, he says that serious film criticism has tended to fall into two classes: the hyper-aesthetic and the sociological, in which latter the film is one more social phenomenon, like low-priced cars. He wants to write a fuller kind of criticism. "A man watches a movie, and the critic must acknowledge that he is that man." Few have thought it necessary to write that "a man reads a book, and the critic must acknowledge that he is that man"; but at least it indicates that Warshow was growing itchy with a compartmented approach, with making an artistic experience serve a narrowed, non-artistic purpose.

He says that he hopes his future work will help to "legitimize" movies. This ambition is conceivable only to those who are not bored by bad movies; who have been drugged by the film's *incidental* immense power for myth and sex-god creation, and are blind to the truth that it has always been an art, that all it has needed at any time is an executant artist. But at least Warshow had stopped being defensive about liking films. If he had lived, he might have helped lead out of the popcorn-and-psychology wilderness those who still go slumming in the balcony for combined juvenile, adolescent, and collegiate reasons. He might have helped to show them that the high proportion of bad films has no more relevance to the art itself than the high proportion of printed trash has to literature; that to relish sleazy gangster films and Kim Novak is much the same as relishing comics and girlie magazines. Warshow would not have tried to "legitimize" those magazines in order to "legitimize" Faulkner. He might have been the first in his group to see that De Sica and Bergman don't need "legitimization"—or at least that a good way to do it is to start being bored by bad movies, by maturing past the worship of mere photography and "presence" and myth-making power.

A word must be said about Lionel Trilling's reminiscent introduction. Puffed with pomposities throughout, it does Warshow small service by saying that his style demands praise "of the kind that used to be given to, say, Hazlitt," and that certain Warshow pieces "establish themselves in the line of Hazlitt, a tradition in which I would place only one other writer of our time, George Orwell, with whose feeling for the language Warshow's had much in common." Warshow is as much a descendant of Hazlitt the Revolutionist (certainly not the drama critic) as are most republican non-dogmatists. But Trilling's admiration of the prose is harder to understand.

Occasionally Warshow writes a beautiful line ("Jews, as Jews, are interchangeable; if even one man has been killed because he was a Jew, then we are all survivors"), and his threnody for his father is as moving as it is percipient; but much of his prose has axe-marks all over it to show how it was hewn. Warshow has indeed some of Orwell's brusque, wiry mode of thought, but I think the author of *Politics and the English Language* (1946) would have squirmed at the writing in some passages that space does not permit me to quote. Warshow would be better

off without Trilling's windy fanfare. His absurdly premature death was and is an occasion for sadness, not for sanctification.

My Autobiography, Charles Chaplin, 1964

(The New Republic, 3 November 1964)

In 1913 the manager of an English music-hall company, which had been touring the United States and was laying off for a week in Philadelphia, received a telegram from the New York office of a film company: "Is there a man named Chaffin in your company or something like that?" If so, the man was to communicate with the sender.

Turning points, clearly defined, occur in many theatrical careers. In 1866 in Liverpool, the twenty-eight-year-old Henry Irving, who had already failed in London, who felt himself condemned to a provincial actor's life and was considering changing professions, got an unexpected letter from Dion Boucicault that changed his life. Chaplin, at twenty-four, was not discouraged; he was a thriving professional who might have gone on to a quite respectable music-hall or musical comedy career. Eventually he might have entered films another way. But that is conjecture. The fact is that this telegram changed his life and, one may say quite soberly, affected the world.

On a previous American tour, Chaplin had been seen in New York by Mack Sennett. Now Sennett, who had formed the Keystone Company, was losing his comedy star and was searching for a replacement. He remembered the comic Englishman but could not quite remember his name. The telegram arrives about one-third of the way through both Chaplin's life and autobiography. That first third is a chronicle of a childhood and early adolescence compounded of misery, hunger, considerable horror, and the desperate cheeriness of the poor in the intervals between the blackest depths. Several writers have noted the Dickensian quality in Chaplin's films. That is also the appropriate adjective for his early London life, with its workhouses, orphan asylums, drunken disappearing father, scrappy occasional meals, shivering cold.

He was the son of vaudeville performers. His older brother, Sydney, was only a half-brother and illegitimate, brought back from a South African escapade by his mother before she married. His father and mother separated when Charles was a baby and, at one time during these chaotic years, he and Sydney had to live with the father and his mistress. His mother was forced to quit the stage when she lost her voice. Her earnings as a seamstress were inadequate, the father's small weekly remittance was undependable. The father, also named Charles Chaplin, died at thirty-seven of drink when his son was still a child. The mother, whose brain was

damaged by malnutrition and who spent much of her later life in mental institutions, lived her last seven years in California, possibly aware that there was no one on earth better known than her son.

Chaplin toured as a member of a troupe of dancing boys when he was eight but quit because of asthma, which soon disappeared. He returned to the theater when he was twelve and, in effect, never looked back; he worked, improved, advanced. Long before the “Chaffin” telegram arrived, he had given evidence—and gave much more of it later—that he had a cool view of his worth. Samuel Goldwyn allegedly once said, “Chaplin is not a businessman, he only knows what he won’t take a penny less than.”

The story that he tells of his film career and his private life is fascinating, though incomplete in both aspects. He gives us the sense of the “company” feeling of the early studios, which were obviously modeled on resident theatrical companies and, more important, he conveys the free-and-easy feeling of filmmaking in those days:

[Sennett’s] manner of working had given me confidence; it seemed right. His remark that first day at the studio: “We have no scenario—we get an idea, then follow the natural sequence of events ...” had stimulated my imagination.

Later Chaplin says of himself in the days of the one- and two-reelers:

Now I was anxious to get to work. Although I hadn’t a story, I ordered the crew to build an ornate café set. When I was lost for a gag or an idea, a café would always supply one.

Concurrently, we get a view of Hollywood itself, expanding as a community to accommodate the money that was piling up there: the *luxe* hotels, athletic clubs, restaurants, beach houses, yachting basins. In those early California days, rajahs sprouted like oranges.

There are, of course, portraits, in depth or in sketch, of many famous persons: Valentino, reticent and likeable, who (Chaplin hints) was more sexually attractive than competent; Fairbanks, as ebullient off-screen as on; Mary Pickford, America’s Sweetheart of Financial Maneuver. At one point, she and Fairbanks and Chaplin and other stars were in the middle of negotiations with First National and hired a pretty girl as a private detective to go out with the president of FN to get from him the facts of a forthcoming merger. William Randolph Hearst was, to Chaplin, the personality who “has made the deepest impression on me.” (Hearst was worth \$400 million, which, in Chaplin’s quiet phrase, was “a lot of money in those days.”)

There are insights into the sources of his principal films. The drastic change in the once-famous comedian Frank Tinney gave him the idea for *Limelight* (1952).

Orson Welles, in negotiations not unruffled, sold him the Landru idea for *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947). Occasionally there are experiences that, though unremarked by Chaplin, seem to prefigure episodes in later films. His brief experience in a print shop as a boy—feeding a huge machine that kept threatening to get ahead of him—suggests *Modern Times* (1936). A 4 a.m. drunken bout with a prizefighter in a Paris hotel room suggests *City Lights* (1931). There are glimpses of abandoned projects: Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (415 B.C.) with Edna Purviance, a screenplay of Paul Vincent Carroll's *Shadow and Substance* (1937) for an inamorata named Joan Barry.

Recurring through the book are passages that deal with acting in general, with comedy in particular, with filmmaking. Although there are few surprises in his opinions—they verbalize what his films dramatize—they are valuable both as his statements and as puncture of much of the aesthetic balloonry that has blown up around him. He gives us insight into the crisis posed for him by the advent of sound. Rumor at the time, prompted by the fate of some other silent stars, was that he would have vocal difficulties, even though his past record should have quashed such nonsense. But the real problem was solely artistic. After *Modern Times* he pondered:

I was faced with the depressing question: should I make another silent picture? I knew I'd be taking a great chance if I did. The whole of Hollywood had deserted silent pictures and I was the only one left. ... If I did make a talking picture, no matter how good I was, I could never surpass the artistry of my pantomime. I had thought of possible voices for the Tramp—whether he should speak in monosyllables or just mumble. But it was no use. If I talked I would become like any other comedian.

His solution was to leave the Tramp back there in silent pictures. The barber in *The Great Dictator* (1940), Calvero in *Limelight*, have certain kinships with him, but they are not the Tramp.

The last third of the book declines in interest. It is strongly colored with retribution, complaint, explanation, justification: about Joan Barry's paternity suit, about his supposed Communist sympathies, about his shameful treatment by such pressure groups as the American Legion and by government arms acting as agents of those pressure groups, like the Immigration Department. His impulse to justification and revenge is easily understandable, but the tone might have been less querulous and spiteful, more in keeping with the justice in his position, his stature as an artist, and the fact that—as must already be apparent to him—history is on his side. What are certainly of minimal interest are his views on politics, economics, society, as he conversed or debated on these matters with world leaders.

Chaplin rewrote this book six times. At its best the style is attractively simple. Sometimes it is coy, and occasionally it is oppressively literary, presumably to prove his intellectual status. Speaking of his few youthful possessions: "My ignoble congeries ... a drab and sorry sight." Of Balinese music: "Even the deep doleful passages had the sinister yearning of a hungry minotaur." As history, the book is incomplete. His reticence about the love affairs he mentions and about his marriages cannot be argued with, but why could he not have been more generous with dates and with other pertinent facts of his career? Sydney is prominent in the early sections, disappears, suddenly reappears as Chaplin's business manager, disappears again, and then we are told that he retired; virtually nothing is said of Sydney's own film career or later life. Details are slim about the making of Chaplin's major pictures, slimmest about *Modern Times*. *A King in New York* (1957), which has not been shown here, goes absolutely unmentioned except for inclusion in an appendix of his films.

Then, too, there is little reflection by Chaplin on his phenomenal, lightning-like success. He knew that his pictures were making money soon after he was allowed to direct himself. Only a year after he joined Keystone, he was wooed away by Essanay with a fatter contract, and a year later Mutual paid him a \$150,000 bonus to sign a \$670,000 contract. But the *human* proportions of his success never struck him until, on his way to New York to sign that Mutual contract, he telegraphed his brother in the East about his arrival and found his train besieged by giant crowds at every stop. The telegrapher had passed the word that Charlie was coming. Still, outside of some reflections on the isolation and loneliness entailed, there is little examination by him of this incredible leap to world fame in two years, the most overwhelming success in theatrical history.

What the film form did—the silent film, at any rate—was to make the clown available to more millions of people than had ever been possible; at the same time, it gave the clown the physical world to play with as he could not have done before. The film thus tapped a treasury that had been accumulating for two thousand years of theaters and circuses and simultaneously lavished greatly expanded means on these performers. When circumstances are right—in environment for work and in public appetite—artists flower in clumps, like the Elizabethan dramatists. Keaton, Langdon, Lloyd, and (a bit later) Laurel and Hardy were part of this new Elizabethan outburst. Chaplin was the Shakespeare of the lot.

But, after the omissions and shortcomings in this book have been noted, as they must be, they can be seen in proportion. It is doubtless foolish to expect the autobiography of a great non-literary artist—particularly a theatrical one—to be a great book. To my knowledge, no such autobiography exists, with the possible exception of Stanislavsky's. All we can hope for is the fullest possible account of

those insights and data that no historian, however thorough, can provide, hopefully not too obscured by inevitable subjectivity. The account here might have been fuller, and the subjectivity itself, on the matter of his art particularly, might have been more rewardingly exploited. But there it is, finished: the statement of his life by the greatest artist that the film has produced, one of the paramount artistic geniuses of the century. It is therefore a document of permanent worth.

***Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, Josef von Sternberg, 1965**

(The New Republic, 3 April 1965)

Josef von Sternberg, the director for whom the flack terms “colorful” and “controversial” might have been coined in the early thirties, has published a book of memoirs/reflections, and, beginning with its title, it is a pleasant surprise. *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* was the name of an early Edison comedy. Von Sternberg has said that he appropriated it for his book because the picture was made in the year he was born (1894), but it is also a nicely wry comment on his life as dictated both by his character and that of the medium in which he has worked. (The book is published by Macmillan.)

Von Sternberg, who now teaches directing at UCLA, has had a career which, for all that is questionable in it, contains two works that are landmarks. *Underworld* (1927), the first gangster film, is a handsome view of a very American phenomenon through the eyes of middle-European impressionism. *The Blue Angel* (1930), Emil Jannings’ first sound film and Marlene Dietrich’s first success, is a small gem of ironic-sexual sentiment, executed against a frieze of George Grosz characters. (Whenever I see it, I “remember” the minor characters in the café as if they have had continuing lives and I have been out of touch with them. I almost feel remorse, as if I owed them a letter.) Scattered through the book are comments about the making of these pictures, as well as the hilarious account of an aborted film of *I, Claudius* (novel by Robert Graves, 1934) with Charles Laughton. There are also a number of tedious, belated small revenges. But there are many observations about film, its condition, its fate, that make the book much more interesting than most similar biographies.

***I Lost It at the Movies: Film Writings, 1954–1965*,**

Pauline Kael, 1965 (*Harper’s Magazine*, June 1965)

A good case can be made that film is the most vigorous art in America today. This is not to speak of American filmmaking but of audience appetite at a serious level. David Boroff wrote recently that, in some measure, films “have become the

literature of the mid-sixties” for college intellectuals. My own experience confirms this with college students and many others. From this interest in films inevitably arises interest in film criticism.

Already this relatively young field of criticism has developed several schools. The sociological school is chiefly concerned with film as treasury of social myth and cultural trait. The *auteur* school, originated in France and distorted in America, disregards cognate standards in other arts, is devoted to purely cinematic values, and firmly categorizes directors (*auteurs*) by these values. A newer school may be called “free” criticism since it apposite to the “free” cinema, which holds that any criterion is applicable or, if one chooses, none at all; and which makes much of the latest vogue word “sensibility,” as opposed to standards.

These schools—and others—seem to me to twine about a center without which they would collapse. That center is a view of film as a descendant of the theater and literature, certainly *sui generis* but not without ancestors or cousins, to be judged by its own unique standards, which are yet analogous to those of other arts: a view that is pluralistic, aesthetic but not anti-science, contemporary but not unhistorical, and humanistic. I need hardly add, after this flattering description, that I subscribe to this last school, which seems to me so sound and comprehensive that it can hardly be called a school.

Pauline Kael, whose growing reputation is based on her contributions to various journals and her broadcast reviews on California radio stations, also subscribes to this school. For this reason and others, I hope that readers will proceed past the cheap title of her collected articles and broadcasts to discover her virtues. This will also necessitate forging past other obstacles, to be described, especially in order to reach the last, best section of the book, which includes an attack on the *auteur* school so incisive that it lifts the debate out of the intramural into a statement of general critical health. She is far above the ruck of journalistic reviewers, and is often more pertinent than most serious critics; yet this collection has shortcomings as unblinkable as its merits.

First, the untidiness of the book reflects an untidiness in her whole mental discipline. I know few collections of previously published (or broadcast) material that seem to have been slammed between covers so hastily, without overhaul. One review opens with the phrase, “Cautious as I am about superlatives”; yet that review is preceded and followed by superlatives too numerous to quote. A footnote to some remarks says that she knew when she uttered them on the radio that they were inadequate, but here she neither replaces nor deepens them. Errors themselves are preserved: Kael describes, for example, an “unforgettably embarrassing” moment at the end of Clifford Odets’s play *Awake and Sing!* (1935) that she ought to forget because it does not exist. Many other instances are varyingly serious, but their totality indicates a disorderliness of mind—tinged with arrogance.

Much of the time Kael writes pungently and well, but she is so anxious to be lively that her style frequently degenerates into chat and backchat, sometimes merely vulgar, sometimes childishly parodying; occasionally she follows an unadmired quotation (from another critic) with “Yeah” or “How’s that again?” And her tangential opinions are often dubious: *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) is “great”—although Tennessee Williams “erred” in having Blanche go mad, which gives us a great play with an erroneous climax. Kael’s opinions on acting are the dogmatic yet hollow assertions of the person, otherwise cultivated, who knows little of that art. (“Deborah Kerr’s performance [in *The Innocents* (1961)] is in the grand manner—as modulated and controlled, and yet as flamboyant, as almost anything you’ll see on the stage.”)

As someone who lives on the West coast, Kael often sees films after they have been shown and reviewed in the East, and she often attacks previous reviewers. Whether or not her targets deserve attack, her comments do not always inspire confidence in her maturity: “Movies are, happily, a popular medium (which makes it difficult to understand why Dwight Macdonald with his dedication to high art sacrifices his time to them).” Moreover, Kael’s persistent feminism gives the book a faintly Pankhurstian flavor, particularly as it creates the impression that she thinks she is a pioneer, one of the first and few women to write criticism. Perhaps it is the candid courage of her feminism that impels Kael to tell us much of her personal history. She wants us to know, for instance, that her father was adulterous; that she saw Vittorio De Sica’s *Shoeshine* (1946) after a lovers’ quarrel; how she edges handsome but undesirable men out of her home; and that she sometimes keeps the lights on during sexual intercourse.

Little would be served here by trading opinions with her on specific films. Instead, let us sample Kael’s intellectual processes. As an example, I select her introduction because, presumably, it is the most recent writing in the book. It is called “Zeitgeist and Poltergeist, or, Are the Movies Going to Pieces?” The first eight paragraphs have nothing at all to do with her subject. Then Kael is reminded of horror movies, and we attend to our theme. To wit: a college instructor of English, watching *Dracula* (1931) on television with her, said that he preferred *The Beast with Five Fingers* (1946). She was “stunned” by his “shocking taste, preferring a Warner Brothers forties mediocrity to the classics.” (The last is a term she is not shy to use.) She “gasped” and asked him why. He replied: “Because it’s completely irrational. It doesn’t make any sense and that’s the true terror.” (Kael calls this “existentialism in a nutshell.” One is tempted to add: How’s that again?)

She then recalls her experience at a theater showing *Eyes Without a Face* (1960), which is “in some peculiar way a classic of horror.” The audience, she feels, reflected her friend’s preference for irrational horror. She proceeds to the following demonstration. Though this audience numbered, she says, 2,646, Kael feels free to judge that they were all between fifteen and twenty-five years old and

at least a third female. Yet they were “pleased and excited” by “the most revolting” images. When a girl on the screen was going to be mutilated, a young man shouted, “Somebody’s going to *get* it.” This proved to her that nobody cared what the movie was about; further—possibly by means of intuition—she inferred that the audience had no interest in the logic of the action.

Then Kael cites plot inconsistencies in four other movies—not horror films, although her friend’s remark about irrationality (which prompted this inquiry) referred only to horror films. She further infers from the success of these four pictures that modern audiences have degenerated, that they want mere collections of shock and sensation, not organic form. She omits to mention any of the myriad inconsistencies that could be cited in successful films ever since Edison; for she is out to prove a new degeneracy, and she says that “box-office returns support” her contention. But *Variety*’s annual list of box-office returns has, among the first ten hits, two movies that she subsequently praises (*Charade* [1963] and *The Pink Panther* [1963]); and it also includes *My Fair Lady* (1964), to which response had hardly been mild and which is built on one of the soundest dramaturgical structures conceived in the twentieth century.

The discontinuous and slovenly logic of the introduction continues; also the flabby glibness (“The director gussies things up with a Marienbadish piece of statuary that may or may not be the key to something or other”); also, question assertion (after citing one experience, she says that projectionists “often” scramble reels of film in art houses—a point that I should like to see substantiated). Space limitation here precludes further detail, and I am glad of it. Though more shortcomings exist in this collection, the reader ought not to be deterred from encountering Kael’s better, valuable work, such as “Fantasies of the Art-House Audience” and her critiques of Jean Renoir and Siegfried Kracauer.

There is a public that reads criticism—in any field—less for content than for fireworks, and Kael frequently appears to cater to this group. But a professional stormy petrel can often seem only a wet hen. At her best, like any perceptive critic, she makes us re-affirm or re-assess; and since films are virtually encyclopedic in scope, Kael’s inquiries lead her, sometimes rewardingly, into issues outside the cinema. She has the courage of her convictions; I simply wish, not that she agreed more with me or with anyone else, but that her convictions were more consistently convincing, were not open to charges of intellectual disorder, personal display, and the very tastelessness she campaigns against.

Yet, in this increasingly important film of film criticism, Pauline Kael is an important figure because, through the interstices of her defects, there shine some comprehension, disdain for fashion, questing for humanism, and fine enthusiasm for her subject. To me, she is interesting and dependably erratic; but that is a far and happy cry from being dependably perverse or doctrinaire or mediocre.

The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me, Lillian Gish, 1969

(The New Republic, 10 May 1969)

For a long time, there have been rumors that Lillian Gish was writing an autobiography centered on D. W. Griffith. Ten years ago when I was in book publishing, I tried to get the manuscript and was told by Gish that it did not yet exist. Now the book is published, and anyone with the smallest interest in films can be glad.

No one would reasonably expect it to be literature of any kind, and it isn't. Gish has had a collaborator, which hasn't kept the style from being, at best, Newspaper Roman and, at worst, Subtitle Bold. ("The essence of virginity—purity and goodness, with nobility of mind, heart, soul, and body—is the stuff out of which, under his prompting, I created heroines.") Also, being not only human but an actress. Gish has quoted some pretty enthusiastic comments about herself, including an article by her late sister which ends: "I never cease to wonder at my luck in having for my sister the woman who, more than any other woman in America, possesses all the qualities of true greatness."

The wonder is not the presence of actress-ego but the small amount of it. She doesn't even mention that in 1932, Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain's biographer, published a book called *Life and Lillian Gish*. And although her book is an actress's autobiography, roughly two-thirds of it is devoted to someone else.

Gish went into films in September 1912. (I got the date elsewhere; specific dates are hard to find in her early pages!) She and her sister, Dorothy, who were child actresses, went down to visit a girlfriend of theirs who was making pictures for Biograph at 11 East 14th Street in New York. (There's a delicatessen on the spot now, a block from my home, and I refuse to buy pastrami anywhere else.) They found that their friend Gladys Smith was now called Little Mary (Pickford, of course). Griffith saw them, tested them at once—Lionel Barrymore played in their test—then put them to work the same day as extras and the next day in roles. Gish and Griffith worked together until after *Orphans of the Storm* in 1921, when he told her he could not afford to pay her what she was worth and urged her to go out on her own.

The success of leading actors and actresses in films often has much to do with their correspondence to public preconceptions. This was probably even truer in silent films when the figure was more of an abstraction. (If pictures were still silent, Candice Bergen might be a big star.) Gish's presence and personality fit perfectly the concept of pure maidenhood that had developed in the nineteenth-century popular theater, so well described by David Grimsted in his book *Melodrama Unveiled* (1968). It was not only the passage of time but the arrival of sound that ended Gish's career in that vein: her voice simply did not support the virginal

persona. Since then, I've seen most of her performances on stage and screen, and, whatever their quality, I've always been struck by the fact that she was, in a sense, forced to become an actress after a successful career as the cherished embodiment of an ideal.

Her book reveals a humorous counterpoint in her. She is hugely practical. Early in her career she realized—as did Chaplin and other silent stars—that she had to learn *everything* about this medium, so she “got to know a film from the time it was raw stock until it was shown to an audience.” She directed a picture for Griffith's company, with her sister in the lead, and later she edited her own picture *Romola* (1924). Her narrative is filled with cash figures. (Including one beautifully blithe sentence: “My contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer called for six pictures in two years, for which I would be paid, I believe, a million dollars.” *I believe!*) She picked plays and novels for screen adaptation with a canny eye. The reader can only relish her private hardheadedness as seen against her public ethereality, whichever happens to be in the foreground at the moment.

As for D. W. Griffith, she gives us the fullest portrait we have yet had of this titanic man. Trotsky's famous remark about Céline is that he “walked into great literature as other men walk into their homes.” In aptness of genius, at least, the same can be said of Griffith and film. By now it's a commonplace that he gave the new medium its grammar; he also gave it many of its aspirations. What we see, first and fundamentally, in Griffith is a change of mind toward film that epitomizes—precedes—a huge cultural shift. At first he was ashamed of being associated with “flickers”; he was a theater actor and playwright, and he wanted to remain one. Within five years he had become oracular and evangelical on the subject of film.

Gish, viewing him with understandable reverence, gives us dozens of personal glimpses. The first time she saw him, he “entered.” He came down the 14th Street stairs singing “Là ci darem la mano” [“There we will give each other our hands”] from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787). Through her eyes, we see his rehearsals, his pranks, his pride of physique, his insights, his dignity. But, overshadowing all details is the sense of conjunction. The right man had come along at the right historical moment, and the result was a fury of creation that helped refashion the culture of the entire world.

There is no adequate book on Griffith. There are intensive studies of individual films. There is an atrocious book by Homer Croy called *Star Maker* (1959). There is a useful monograph by Iris Barry published by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which owns the Griffith papers, including an uncompleted autobiography. (The new edition of the Barry book, 1965, contains a revised version of Beaumont Newhall's interview with Billy Bitzer, Griffith's cameraman, and Eileen Bowser's annotated list of Griffith films.) Kevin Brownlow's recent *The Parade's Gone By* (1968) contains, with other Griffith material, a good interview with

Joseph Henabery, who was Lincoln in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). But Gish's chronicle of her nine-year association with the director and her subsequent friendship with him is unique and invaluable.

Full studies of Griffith will show, I think, that his unquestionable genius was seriously maimed by the tropes of the theater that conditioned him; that, although he was certainly treated abominably by the film world of which he had been prime architect, at least some of his bitterness at the "decline" of film was a resentment of the twentieth century, which was gradually outmoding his rhetoric of virtue and villainy and his rather primitive meliorism. But any objective study will only show his true greatness more greatly; and Gish, whose intent was not and could not have been objectivity, has blessed those future authors. As she has indebted present readers.

Bergman on Bergman: Interviews, Ingmar Bergman, 1973 (*The New Republic*, 24 August 1974)

Ingmar Bergman is probably the second most-interviewed director in history. (The first is surely Jean-Luc Godard, but he may be losing the title.) Some of the interviews have been exercises in evasion; some have been long concealments of irritation—mostly at himself for consenting to be interviewed but also at questioners who think artists are obligated to explain their work; some, even though they contain elements of the above, have been enlightening. Now we get by far the best of the lot, a book-length series of ten interviews called *Bergman on Bergman* (1973). These are the best for a banally simple reason: the three men who conducted all the interviews are Swedes—Swedish filmmakers and critics. Stig Björkman, Torsten Manns, and Jonas Sima not only know Bergman's work thoroughly (which has been true of other interviewers), they also know his language, his culture, his social environment, and the people in and around his career. And though Bergman speaks pretty good English, he can luxuriate in his own language.

The talks were held on various dates between June 1968 and April 1970. The plan, generally but not rigidly followed, was to trace his life, treating his career as it developed and each of the forty pictures up to 1970 as he came to it. Over the many months Bergman likes and dislikes his interviewers, argues and agrees with them, and often broaches subjects himself. Out of all this interplay some basic themes are developed, not always by design.

First, like many artists, Bergman dislikes aesthetic pronouncements ("My basic view of things is—not to have any basic view of things"), but, also like many artists, if he talks long enough some generalized aims emerge:

If one can get ordinary people to shut their mouths for a minute after the curtain has fallen, or get ordinary folk to make themselves a sandwich and sit together and have a chat in the kitchen for five minutes after seeing a film ... All that matters to me is to influence people, get into contact with them, drive a wedge into people's indifference or passivity.

At one point the interviewers lead him even deeper, thus into greater ambiguity:

Afterwards, in manufacturing the artistic product, one does one's utmost—often quite helplessly—to find out what it was one really meant. This purposeless game that is so serious ... is something one becomes more and more conscious of, I think, as the years go by. It would be crazy not to bear this constantly in mind, I think: that it's all just a game; that one is in the privileged position of being allowed to ritualize a lot of tensions and complications within and around oneself.

This last comment leads to the second theme: a (let's call it) Strindbergian quality of Bergman's work. He constantly reiterates the relation between his personal life and his work, even the influence of where he lives. When he moved to a villa in a wealthy section, he felt the move change the film he was making. To Bergman, as to his master Strindberg, this life-work relation does not mean the merely diaristic or the fashionably "confessional": it means the self as the cosmos, just as the atom is the solar system in miniature. It is the best kind of latter-day romanticism, with the self as agonist, not as idol.

Next he tells us about the symbiotic aspects of his film and theater work, a relation that has largely been ignored outside Sweden. (Note the quotation above where he talks about influencing people after a play *or* a film.) On occasion the relation has been quite conscious, even deliberate. *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) was "influenced, I think, by my production of *The Seagull* at the Royal Dramatic Theater." And this man who has made some of the best films in existence says:

Film isn't so difficult. Theater is much harder. A film is a once-and-for-all product. Theater's a repetitive art ... [the director's] difficulties are much greater in the theater than in films.

Bergman's double career guides the double careers of many of his actors, who have worked with him for years in both arts. Over and over he talks about actors, how he has learned from them and about them: and this fine artist states in one crystalline no-nonsense passage what he sees as his function with them:

Yes, actors like working with me and it's easy to explain. As a professional I've devoted all my time to learning how an actor functions, how to get the best results out of him. Since the actor is my chief instrument I have to learn how to collaborate one hundred

percent, and that's something I've gradually figured out. They know they'll get all the service, stimulation, and technical assistance they need.

They *must* know it: the results speak for themselves, even in his lesser films. But like every good director of actors, he knows they can sometimes supply what he didn't even know he was looking for, that acting is a creative as well as an interpretative art.

In its circuitous yet concentric way *Bergman on Bergman* gives us an important artist telling us more than he perhaps wants to, more than he knew he could tell. For his admirers the book is essential; for anyone interested in art, whether or not he cares for Bergman or even for film, the book is a rambling but fascinating journey into the recesses where questions are formed, not answered. Thus, since the book is ostensibly composed of answers, this is also a tribute to his questioners.

Bergman on Bergman includes a full filmography, together with lots of pictures.

A Life in Movies, Michael Powell, 1986

(*The New Republic*, 11 May 1987)

What is more rare than a well-written, rich-textured film biography? In the world of books, not much. *A Life in Movies* (1986), the autobiography of the English director Michael Powell, fills the bill to overflowing—a word that comes easily to mind because it's 705 pages, is only Volume One, and stops in 1948! Powell is now eighty-one and took six years to write this volume; typically clear-eyed, he decided to play safe by publishing this (huge) portion now. We can all hope to read the second volume if, as he says, "I am spared." Meanwhile, thanks for what we have. Powell was the director or co-director, co-writer, co-producer—most notably with the Hungarian émigré Emeric Pressburger—of more than fifty films. Probably the best known in the United States are *Peeping Tom* (1960), *The Red Shoes* (1948), *Stairway to Heaven* (1946), *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945), *The Invaders* (1941), *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing* (1942), and *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943). Powell has loved filmmaking, with all its knocks and disappointments, and has very much to say about it that is fascinating as history and insight. He has loved women, including one of his two wives, and is almost as fascinating about them. He has loved a great deal that he has seen and done outside films. His variety of loves warms the whole book and makes us overlook the excesses (some episodes go on a touch too long) and the minor lapses. (For instance, he gives the wrong first name to the renowned cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan.)

He loved his boyhood and youth as much as he loved anything that followed. He gives the first 115 pages to his twenty years before films, up to 1925,

and these are the most consistently well-written pages in the book. He grew up on a farm near Canterbury—his father was a gentleman farmer—and he still thinks of himself as a Man of Kent. His portraits of his parents and relatives and friends, his evocation of life in the English countryside before the First World War, are splendid—something like Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928). Here is Powell as a boy accompanying his father to the local flour mill:

The racket in the flour mill was immense when the wheel was turning and the corn was being ground. The whole structure shook with delight, like a horse on a frosty morning. The air was dusty with flour. The wooden chutes and trap doors, down which the corn and the flour slid, banged and rattled like trap doors in a pantomime chase. The leather belts, which connected wheel to flying wheel, slapped and whirled. ... The miller would open wonderful little doors for me to see the grain, or the flour, falling to its destiny.

Writing at this pitch is not common in autobiographies of any kind. In film books it's so rare that I want especially to underscore it lest, by its very title (accurate though it is), this be accounted one more jerry-built filmer's chronicle.

Powell *père*, an errant, sporty type, chose not to return home after the First World War; left wife and brood; eventually took over a hotel on the Riviera. This was the making of his son's life. On a visit to his father, Powell, who had been working as a bank clerk, confessed his love of films, and Powell senior introduced him to members of an American film crew, headed by Rex Ingram, that was shooting nearby. Powell got a job as assistant to the stills photographer and just kept going from there—not smoothly but persistently.

I doubt that Powell remembers long-ago conversations word for word: he remembers the gist, and his dialogue may be an improvement over what was actually said. (That's what screenwriters are for.) Note that he lamented, still somewhat laments, the advent of sound, even though his own directing career was entirely during the sound era. Note that he says, "I don't intend to go into great detail about the content of the films I worked on during the war years," then goes into great detail about the content while recounting how the films were made. Note that, incredibly, this book about a picture-maker includes no photographs. Still, the book is chock-full of interest, is studded with firsthand observations on the film world—and the world outside it. This, for instance, on wartime London: "Many people had been evacuated and the population was down to about two million. It had become really a charming city except for a few bombs." The line is jarring in a welcome way. Like the rest of this book, it comes from someone who has his own eyes, was there, is unafraid to say what he saw and thought, and can say it well.

Acting in Film, Michael Caine, 1990

(*The New Republic*, 25 June 1990)

Writing in 1897 about a London theater to which he was partial, Bernard Shaw said: "The secret of the Adelphi is ... simply good acting and plenty of it. And, unlike most critics, I am fond of acting." I certainly share Shaw's fondness, and I thought of his remark when I wrote about Armand Assante's fiery performance in *Q & A* (1990). I realized that, though hardly for the first time, lately I've been writing about good acting quite often.

Look at just the past twelve months, and only at American films. Here in reverse chronological order are examples: Michael Caine in *A Shock to the System* (1990), Debra Winger in *Everybody Wins* (1990), Jessica Lange in *Music Box* (1989), Jessica Tandy and Morgan Freeman in *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), Morgan Freeman and Denzel Washington in *Glory* (1989), Margaret Sophie Stein, Lena Olin, and Anjelica Huston in *Enemies, A Love Story* (1989), Emily Lloyd in *In Country* (1989), James Spader and Andie MacDowell in *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989). This list is selective; there are others.

The people and performances in the list range from immense experience (Tandy) to comparative beginners (MacDowell), from hypercaloric intensity (Assante) to an almost free-floating state (Spader). Whatever the distinctions between them, all these performances were realistic. Still, since the great majority of films in every country are realistic, to say this is not much more than to say that the performances were on film. In the theater we can see—if less frequently than once upon a time—varied styles of acting; in films the compass is narrower. But within that compass, actors in American films ring a lot of changes when they get the chance. Compare Ron Silver the Talmudist in *Enemies, A Love Story* with Ron Silver the psychosexual maniac in *Blue Steel* (1989). Of course the two scripts called for two different Silvers, but Silver supplied them.

Good acting in American films is not a recent phenomenon. Lillian Gish made *Way Down East* in 1920. For the first thirty-five years or so, studios were run by men concerned with film, with the development of stars and of cadres of supporting players. A fearsome amount of acting in the Golden Age was not good, or even passable, but when it was good, it was due in some measure to what André Bazin called the genius of the system.

Nowadays conditions are so different, so devoid of "system," that a good performance seems almost an act of individual heroism. Most of the jeremiads about current conditions are accurate. Filmmaking is now owned by non-filmmakers. The general aim is to produce blockbusters; the production process often starts with the packaging of projects by agents around stars and others whom they represent. Sequels and horror films that require only warm bodies rather than actors flood the

screen, as if to prove Mencken's crack that there's no underestimating the American intelligence. (An inanity called *Look Who's Talking* [1989] has gone through the box-office roof, and a sequel is planned. *Bird on a Wire* [1990], the nadir of the month, is a smash and will doubtless be followed by *Birds on Other Wires*.)

Yet in the midst of this money maelstrom, good films get made, from the small-scale (*sex, lies, and videotape*) to the large (*Glory*). And within these films, even within much lesser ones, actors who believe in truth-through-acting manage to achieve it. More: speaking only of New York and acknowledging the wider potentialities in the theater, I'd say that the best realistic acting now available to us is on the screen.

How does this current good film acting come about, when it does? Risky though it is to explain the provenance of good art, I offer a conjecture. Perhaps, after ninety years, actors are beginning to feel more confident that film is a fit home for good acting. In the past, there was a hierarchy of theater over film, with the theater as the locus toward which every serious actor aspired. This hierarchy seems no longer to be valid. Half of the people named earlier, so far as I know, have never appeared on the stage. With the passage of time and the alterations in the cultural landscape, the idea of good acting now seems appropriate to film itself, instead of being something that sometimes spills over from the theater. This relocation of energy prospers in the face of hostile industrial conditions because the urge to act well always struggles toward possibilities for fulfillment.

One of the best of present-day film actors, Michael Caine, presents his professional thoughts in *Acting in Film* (1990), which is simultaneously published in two forms—not hardbound and paper-bound but hardbound and videotape (book, 153 pages; videotape, sixty minutes). This joint publication is an excellent idea because one form gives you words to consider and the other presents the actor himself, in his own voice and person illuminating those words. Though a good deal of the material occurs in both forms, the book contains matter that is not on the tape—some advice about preparation and about socializing on the set, for instance—and the tape includes things that couldn't be in the book—Caine directing young actors in scenes from three of his films, *Alfie* (1966), *Deathtrap* (1982), and *Educating Rita* (1983).

The source is a "Dramatis Personae" BBC series on acting techniques, which dealt with opera, farce, Restoration style, and so on. In 1986 (he mentions on the tape that he was fifty-three at the time) Caine spent two days speaking to and working with a group of young English actors, explaining and demonstrating to these theater-oriented people, with friendly authority, why and how film acting is different. At first he seems merely to be offering practical tips—how to con your partner in a love scene into using a breath freshener, etc. Then he proceeds to specifics of technique. One among dozens of instances:

When you are the on-camera actor in a close-up, never shift your focus from one eye to the other. Sounds odd, doesn't it? But when you look at something, one of your eyes leads. So during a close-up be especially careful not to change whichever eye you are leading with. It's an infinitesimal thing, but noticeable on the screen. The camera misses nothing!

On the tape he demonstrates a shift. It's infinitesimal, but at the least this advice is an aid to concentration, and concentration is one of his key terms. In his directing of the young actors, he emphasizes that the camera is their friend and that less is always more but that less is never nothing. He makes them search for the core of every line, the reason that it is worth saying.

The more general thoughts are in the book:

Audiences themselves have had a lot to do with the changes in film acting. They catch on very fast to what is truthful and what is not. Once audiences saw acting like Henry Fonda's in *The Grapes of Wrath* [1940], they tuned in to the difference between behavior that is based on carefully observed reality and the stagier, less convincing stuff. ... Over the years, the modern cinema audience has been educated to watch for and catch the minute signals an actor conveys.

Caine's spectrum isn't wide, but everything he says is sensible and much of it is resonant. At any rate, the book and tape taken together—which I recommend—help to explain how one of the most reliable of actors got that way.

The Graham Greene Film Reader: Reviews, Essays, Interviews, & Film Stories, Graham Greene, 1993 (*The New Republic*, 5 December 1994)

In the public mind no famous novelist is more closely associated with film than Graham Greene—because so many of his novels and stories have been adapted for the screen and because critics often note that cinematic techniques affected his writing. What is less widely known, despite the fact that a selection of his reviews was published in the United States in 1972, is that Greene spent four-and-a-half years as a film critic for London weeklies between 1935 and 1940.

Now all the reviews have been collected by David Parkinson, along with other related materials—essays, reviews of film books, relevant interviews and lectures and letters, some short documentary film scripts, some film stories and treatments—in *The Graham Greene Film Reader* (1993).

The reviews are the main reason for the book's existence, and rightly so. Greene was a journalist critic, a profession that includes Bernard Shaw and Max Beerbohm

among illustrious others, and he knew that his job was both to enlighten as he could and to be invitingly readable. (Academic critics frequently forget the second part; equally often, journalists forget the first part.) But one commonly assumed journalistic function Greene explicitly refused: that of bare-bones consumers guide. The words “don’t miss” or “do miss” or their British equivalents do not occur.

Most of these reviews are relatively brief. Almost always, more than one film is discussed in what were obviously magazine columns with rigorous space restrictions. Rarely is a whole column devoted to one film, and we sometimes wish that Greene had been able to expand. Why, then, are these nearly sixty-year-old reviews worth reading now?

First, if Greene gives only one full paragraph to a film, he manages to fix its nature (subject and tone), along with comments on individuals whom he likes or dislikes (actors or directors), together with his reasons, including frank prejudices. Yes, a hint of compression touches some of the pieces, but on the whole the perceptions sparkle like a busy jeweler’s window.

Second, which contributes mightily to this effect, his style. This style is dialectically opposed to the shape and urgency of the very column that it’s used for. Greene writes unhurriedly, precisely, wittily, with the aplomb of the gentleman buff (attempting to maintain a slight air of condescension while being absolutely fascinated by film). Some samples:

Mr. Charles Boyer’s performances are always admirable; you can believe, listening to his deep nervous voice, in the icy country behind his eyes. ... Mr. Boyer [seems] condemned by some grim Dante of a film executive to suffer and be redeemed by love and suffer again in endless circles.

Herr Pommer, the German producer, and Mr. William K. Howard, the American director of [*Fire Over England*, 1937] ... have caught the very spirit of an English public-schoolmistress vision of history.

Liebesmelodie [1935] is one of those devastatingly gay films of Austrian life: one’s spirit withers as the glasses fill.

Mr. Cagney can do nothing that is not worth watching. On his light hoover’s feet, with his quick nervous hands and his magnificent unconsciousness of the camera, he can pluck distinction out of the least promising part.

[Sylvia Sidney] disappears into the night without telling [George] Raft that she’s going to have a baby, and has it—apparently next day. Physiological tact could hardly be carried further.

Just as we may begin to think that Greene’s critical process consists of Wildean reversals (“How unbearable these films of M. Sacha Guitry would be if they were

not so successful”) or of elegant paraphrase of Movieland silliness, he slips in a pang that could only come from true affection: “I wish there existed an organization with the means to anthologize the excellent sequences that can often be found in the worst films and save them from oblivion.” Or amidst the scintillations about ephemera, Greene pauses when the occasion absolutely demands it and discloses the critical mind that underlies the glitter. Apropos of *Modern Times* (1936):

I am too much an admirer of Mr. Chaplin to believe that the most important thing about his new film is that for a few minutes we are allowed to hear his agreeable and rather husky voice in a song. The little man has at last definitely entered the contemporary scene: there has always before been a hint of “period” about his courage and misfortunes. ... There were occasions ... when he seemed almost to go back to Dickens. The change is evident in his choice of heroine. [His prior fair-haired leading women] never appeared again in leading parts, for they were quite characterless. But Miss Paulette Goddard, dark, grimy, with her amusing urban and plebeian face, is a promise that the little man will no longer linger at the edge of mawkish situation, the unfair pathos of the blind girl and the orphan child. ... For the first time the little man does not go off alone. ... He goes in company looking for what may turn up.

Occasionally a passage provides, consciously or not, a glimpse into the novelist. The following was written in 1938, the year of *Brighton Rock*, which is known as his first explicitly Catholic novel:

Murder, if you are going to take it seriously at all, is a religious subject; the interest of a detective-story is the pursuit of exact truth, and if we are at times impatient with the fingerprints, the time-tables, and the butler’s evasions, it is because the writer, like some early theologians, is getting bogged down in academic detail.

The once-notorious review of *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937), with Shirley Temple, is included in this book. In 1938 Twentieth Century-Fox successfully sued Greene and his magazine for libel because Greene had written that “the owners of the child star” were exploiting “her neat and well-developed rump” in tight trousers for “her admirers—middle-aged men and clergymen.” The verdict made the review unprintable, yet here it is—and this collection was previously published in Britain. (The editor, Parkinson, includes a letter of Greene’s to *The Times* in 1981, refuting the much-repeated assertion that the libel verdict put the magazine out of business. It was in a shaky state and would have closed anyway.) Unlike many scandals of the past, this review still seems daring. It would still ruffle feathers, which of course is not to say that it is untrue.

Overall, this assemblage of Greene’s criticism is a boon. Not much of it is as searching as the Chaplin excerpt above, but all of it is the response of a quick-silver mind expressed in savory prose. Time has added an agreeable patina: our

knowledge that these reviews were written by a subsequently celebrated novelist and screenwriter. He himself thought, in 1984, that his film criticism, if re-published, might seem “a little bit *vieux jeu*.” But the *jeu* is not remotely *vieux*.

The second half of the book provides a good deal that’s interesting (including the fact that he rarely went to films in later life). In the interviews, sharp obiter dicta abound, and Greene occasionally is surprisingly candid. Here is a section that was omitted from the preface to the screenplay of *The Third Man* (1949) when it was first published in 1950:

Writing a novel does not become easier with practice. The slow discovery by a novelist of his individual method can be exciting, but a moment comes in middle age when he feels he no longer controls his method; he has become its prisoner. ... I had tried to escape from my prison by writing for the films, but *The Third Man* only beckoned me into another and more luxurious prison.

That film was directed by Carol Reed, which leads to a personal note. Reading this book, I watched for and especially relished Greene’s comments on Reed and the French actor-director Louis Jouvet. In London in 1951, Greene took my wife and me to lunch and, among much else, was lavish in his praise of Reed, for whom he also had written *The Fallen Idol* in 1948. (He worked only once more with Reed—on *Our Man in Havana* [1959].) And he was mournful about Jouvet, with whom he had been discussing a project. (Jouvet had just died.)

Themes & Subjects

“On Dubbing: Whole Actors, Please”

(Theatre Arts, October 1961)

When sound film arrived in 1927, the late Sir Thomas Beecham allegedly exploded: “Now there’s *no* place where one can go and hear nothing.” It turned out to be worse than that, for audible dialogue divided an art that had been as supranational as music into numerous national arts.

Two very different methods were soon devised to overcome the language barrier: the use of subtitles and of post-recorded translated dialogue, called dubbing. Each method has its intolerant partisans. I am an intolerant partisan of subtitling.

The long debate as to which is better has lately flared again. This debate concerns any intelligent person who likes films because (a shameful fact but true) the majority of interesting films come from abroad. Thus this is more than a parochial question; it involves the satisfaction of the best film audience.

To help crystallize my reasons, let me state what I take to be the pro-dubbers’ arguments, from past writings by Bosley Crowther (of *The New York Times*) and others who feel as he does, and reply to them. Let us establish two ground rules. I am comparing only good dubbing with good subtitling; no one on either side defends bad work. And I am talking about an audience that does not understand foreign languages, which includes me.

Now to the arguments.

Subtitles are visually annoying

This is irrefutable, but we are dealing with a choice between two annoyances, two substitutes. Both are lame; the only question is, which is less lame? No viewer enjoys seeing words printed across a lady's bosom or across the Japanese countryside, but many of us would much rather put up with that annoyance than be cheated of the voices of the actors we are watching and of the sound of their language. That seems to us a considerably greater annoyance.

If dubbing had been adopted universally when it was invented (1931), I would never have heard the voices of Vittorio De Sica in *Bread, Love, and Dreams* (1953), Françoise Rosay in *Carnival in Flanders* (1935), or Victor Sjöström in *Wild Strawberries* (1957), to name three out of thousands. That is a quite genuinely dreadful thought to me and, surely, to others who esteem acting as a potent art.

Further, the very sound of a foreign language is an important ingredient in the flavor of a foreign film—it helps to create the work's *ambiance* and define its world.

Subconsciously, at least, the pro-dubbers recognize this fact because most of them want dubbing to be done in accented English. This hybrid position admits that foreign sound is part of the effect of a film, and that purely American sounds are inappropriate. But consider the logic of stripping off a French soundtrack so that an American can speak in English the words of a Frenchman in France, giving the Frenchman a foreign accent in his own country to make him sound like a native. It is, of course, an old theatrical convention, but it has always been irrational and it is in this instance unnecessary.

Professor Robert Gessner contends that a subtitle is “aesthetically disastrous” to a pictorial composition. It is certainly not aesthetically helpful; but the totality of an acted film is sight *and* sound, and a device that helps us to retain both seems to me aesthetically preferable by far. Perhaps a way can be found to print subtitles on a black band added to the bottom of the frame. That would be both more legible and less hurtful than the present method.

But even the present method is much less annoying than watching dubbed versions, and being constantly aware that every word you hear was never uttered by the person who seems to be speaking it; that you are being tendered a silent-film performance plus a radio performance by someone else.

Dubbing and post-recording are usual in making most foreign films, anyway

True. In most foreign (and many domestic) films, dialogue is often recorded after filming, generally because the place or manner of filming is unsuitable for recording. It is also true that in some foreign films, especially Italian ones, different actors

are used from the start for the vocal parts. One Italian beauty whose career is now over was never actually heard by the public; another who is now being launched is beginning the same way.

But the vast majority of actors who are *actors* do their own recording. Although an actor may record his dialogue later, it is still *his* performance, the one that was in his mind when he did the things visible on the screen. It is difficult to imagine that serious actors (and it is their work we are interested in safeguarding) would spend their careers allowing their lines to be spoken by others in their own languages. Occasionally a good actor makes a film in a foreign country and allows his lines to be dubbed in the foreign language, but the better he is and the better known he is, the less likely it is to happen and the less satisfactory when it does happen. Anyone familiar with Katina Paxinou, for example, cannot help being disturbed by the Italian voice used for her in the subtitled “original” version of Visconti’s *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960).

There exists a kind of mechanic’s mentality that sees filmmaking as an international switching yard where different strips of dialogue can be hitched to a film for export. For thirty years American film companies have been doing that with films they send abroad. Admittedly it is a neat, electronically facile idea, but it disregards completely the wholeness of acting, the pride of the serious actor, and the interests of the serious audience.

Fuller translations can be used with dubbing than with subtitles

Obviously dubbing allows more words to be used, and skill in lip synchronization is constantly improving, both as to matching and to ease. Indeed, a new device called Instant Sync makes the claim that it reduces a present normal day’s dubbing to six minutes’ work.

But this argument misses the real point. Of all the art forms employing spoken or written language, film is the only one that can be presented in another country *without translation*. To look at a Russian edition of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1869) with interleaved English synopses would be nonsense because the novel depends solely on language. By contrast, to watch Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) with subtitles is to be able to follow a performance in Russian. There is, inevitably, some loss; nevertheless (this is worth repeating) subtitles make it possible *to follow a performance in Russian*.

It is this unique boon that the dubbers would destroy, replacing it with the translation that is essential elsewhere and inessential here. And when the subtitles are as good as those by Noelle Gillmor (*Hiroshima, Mon Amour* [1959]), Rose Sokol (*The Joker* [1960]), or Herman G. Weinberg (too numerous to cite), pith and character are amply conveyed.

Virtually every country except the United States and the British Commonwealth has always seen imported films in dubbed versions

Yes, and what are they like? I have seen American films dubbed into Italian and Spanish, and although I am not competent to comment on the translations, I can certify that those audiences have a distorted idea of the personalities and abilities of James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Orson Welles.

The United States and the British Commonwealth are also virtually the only places where operas are presented in their original languages. On this subject Harold C. Schonberg wrote earlier this year in *The New York Times*: “If translation involves a loss in purely musical values—and it has to—then what the opera-in-English people want to do has its immoral aspects. Instead of wanting to bring people up to the level of music, they are demanding that music be brought down to the level of the people.”

Dubbed films will attract larger audiences than subtitled films

Further in his article, Mr. Schonberg said: “[The translators’] idea is to get people into opera houses by offering inducements and bribery. Anything goes. Too many people today are making a living by showing the public how to evade its mental responsibilities. Simplifications, popularizations, condensations—anything but the real thing.”

A few months ago I might have paraphrased this by saying it is artistically blasphemous to tamper with *L'Avventura* (1960) in order to attract Sinatra fans. That is still true, but another factor has enlarged the argument. Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), with subtitles, is an immense success not only in New York but—at this writing—in eight other American cities. It is probably the most successful foreign-language film ever shown in the United States, and its press agents state that there are no plans to release a dubbed version.

The truth seems to be that subtitles will not keep an apposite audience away from a good foreign film. Nor will an inferior foreign film (excepting vehicles for sex bombs and epics like *Hercules* [1958]) substantially increase its chances by being dubbed. Indeed, there is evidence that dubbing may discourage part of the audience that a foreign film might otherwise attract; and it is incontrovertible that subtitling is profitable or it would long ago have ceased.

Some foreign directors approve of the dubbing of their films for export

Let us take Fellini as a case in point. Gillmor, the expert subtitler who is now a believer in dubbing and who had Fellini's blessing for the American dubbing of *La Dolce Vita*, wrote an article for *The New York Times* about his keen support. John

Francis Lane, who was Fellini's choice to prepare the dubbed British version of the film, wrote a similar article for the British magazine *Films and Filming*. I don't know whether a dubbed version has been, or will be, released in England, but after the success of the subtitled version in the U.S., we have not seen any insistence by Fellini that the present film be withdrawn and that a dubbed version replace it. Since he is an artist, one must infer that he is artistically satisfied with the subtitled version or he would not have permitted it in the first place; and that his approval of dubbing—so enthusiastically reported by Gillmor and Lane—was a realistic appraisal of non-artistic and, in the event, unrealized concerns.

Proponents of dubbing frequently dub their opponents "intellectuals" or "aesthetes" or "purists" (a species of name-calling that fits Mr. Schonberg's description of their counterparts in opera). I can only wish it were true. If a man becomes a purist simply because he prefers a device that enables him to enjoy films in languages he doesn't understand and to enjoy foreign actors' whole performances, then obviously there are hundreds of thousands of purists all over America.

But it was not purism that, up to now, kept this country relatively free of dubbing; it was economics. Most pictures shown in foreign countries are American, and, almost from the advent of sound, were dubbed to insure mass audiences abroad. However, few pictures shown in the U.S. are foreign, and few of those few are intended for mass audiences, so subtitling—the cheaper process—was employed. For me and for many others, this was a happy circumstance. It enabled us to go to theaters full of actors' voices from all over the world, and to understand them. Now we are told that we must lose these advantages because the mechanics of dubbing have been improved.

Well, it's an ill wind. If the dubbers prevail, their success will be one of the few things that reconcile me to middle age. At least by being born when I was, I will have had thirty-odd years of foreign films as foreign films. But I shudder for my filmgoing future, and for generations yet unborn—or is it unbored?

"On Pornography" (*The New Republic*, 11 July 1970)

One pleasant aspect of pornography discussions is that they never end, even within oneself. No set of arguments can be airtight, and one can always think of points to be added or changed in one's own arguments. But here are some of my present views:

I dislike pornography; and I dislike censorship laws

I dislike pornography because after the excitements, there comes tedium; and with the tedium comes a sense of imperfection. After sex itself comes no such tedium

(languor is something else) and no such basic sense of inappropriateness. Pornography excites me because all my neural systems seem to be adequately hooked up, but after the shock of crossing the threshold into that “world” wears off, which doesn’t take so long, I begin to think that porno represents an ideal—essentially male—of sexual freedom and power, unrelated to reality as is, or as is desirable. I am an anti-idealist; ideals seem morally and functionally corruptive. I am against this ideal as well.

I dislike censorship laws because they intrude on personal rights. Most laws operate between at least two people: they protect me from you and vice-versa. Laws against pornography, like laws against drinking and drug-taking and suicide, come between me and myself. I object to the state’s arrogance.

People want pornography

This has been true of many cultures, especially for men, in many areas. Porno producers are not philanthropists or missionaries; they’re in business because people want what they produce. What right have some of us to tell others that they may not have what they want? (I know some intelligent, cultivated men—and a few such women—who delight in pornography.) I disbelieve in the legislation of taste.

The question of theatrical productions like *Oh! Calcutta!* (1969) is self-solving. If you want to go, go; if not, don’t. The concept of “the dram of eale” is a puritan delusion. Gresham’s Law doesn’t operate in art. If bad art drove out good, there would not be any good art at all because for centuries there has been more bad art than good.

Most films are now clearly labeled by the ratings system of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). That system has manifest defects, but I have argued for it—and would still—as the best defense against repression. The X rating is, as is often said, a license for opportunists, but numbers of people want what the opportunists offer and I don’t recognize anyone’s right to deny it to them. More important, the X rating is a license for the serious filmmaker who wants to deal with sexual subjects. I’m glad that *Midnight Cowboy* (whatever its faults) was made and widely distributed in 1969, something that was difficult anyway and would have been nearly impossible without the protection of the X rating.

The concept of the state’s interest in pornography, possibly related to the Roman concept of the republic of virtue, is gradually being eroded by scientific research. The research in the Lockhart report (published in 1970 by the first American commission on obscenity and pornography, which was formed in 1968), incomplete though it is, supports the belief that there is no connection between pornography and sexual crime. A Danish study (cited in *The New York Times*, Nov. 9, 1970) finds that sex crimes have sharply declined in Denmark—coincidentally?—in the three

years since censorship laws have been eased there. The data and conclusions of the British Arts Council report on obscenity laws (full text in the *New Statesman*, Aug. 8, 1969) support a recommendation for repeal of the Obscene Publication Acts. The state surely has a legitimate interest in the moral welfare of the community, but every ground for including pornography in that interest is weakening.

The only real legal question is the protection of children. And it is a *question*. I can't define what a child is—six, yes, but sixteen?—and I can't define what “protection” is. I'm simply not convinced that a young person without sexual experience and some maturity of judgment can see pornography as pornography: that is—aside from understanding the acts themselves and understanding the unconventionality (even impossibility) of some of them—can see the relation of pornography to experience, as commentary and stimulant and revenge. “Depravity and corruption” are supposed to be considerations, too, though no one seems to know much about them. I have no wish to be blithe about parents' concern for a child (particularly since I have no children), but my guess is that a parent's attitude toward his child's exposure to pornography is as much secret embarrassment at revelation of his own fantasies as it is protection of the young.

Censorship legislation for minors, however, only moves the semantic and moral problem to a different locus. Two sociologists on the Lockhart commission recommended the abolition of *all* statutory legislation, for young persons as well as adults, on the ground that obscenity and pornography have long proved undefinable. They would rather rely on “informal social controls” and “improvements in sex education and better understanding of human sexual behavior” than on “ambiguous and arbitrarily administered laws.”

Nevertheless I confess that, even without scientific data to prove harm, I'm uneasy at the thought of children being exposed to pornography before those “improvements” are realized.

Pornography is of two distinct kinds

I don't mean the difference between pornography and erotic art nor the argument that sections of recognized classics—by Rabelais, Joyce, etc.—are pornographic. (An argument I cannot accept. A sexual portion of a genuine artwork cannot—in my understanding—be pornographic. The latter means, for me, material devised *only* for sexual stimulation.)

The real difference is between imagined pornography—written or drawn or painted—and performed pornography, done in actuality or on film or in still photographs. The latter entails the degradation of human beings. It doesn't seem to me to matter that these performing men and women always seem cheerful and busily engaged, or that (reportedly) some of the occupants enjoy it or that some of

them perform public sex acts as part of lives that are otherwise quite conventional. Obviously conditionings and rationales can vary widely, but I cannot believe that the use of human beings for these purposes is socially beneficial or morally liberating. On the contrary, I think it socially stultifying and morally warped.

I'm not talking about nudity and simulated intercourse in such plays as *Che!* (1969), which are frequently done quite self-righteously as an attempt to *épater le bourgeois*. I mean (currently available in person and on film in New York and other cities) the public performance of coition, fellatio, cunnilingus, and mutual masturbation—with the coition usually interrupted so that the male ejaculation can be seen.

I've been as excited by watching some of those films as a human being ought presumably to be. But essentially those films seem to me acts of vindictiveness by men against women in return for the sexual restrictions and taboos of our society and for the cruelties of women toward men that those restrictions have produced. The vindictiveness is essentially mean-spirited and exploitative. I would hope that the socio-sexual improvements on which the Lockhart sociologists rely may affect performed pornography first.

In any event, I think that the lumping-together of all pornography—imagined and performed—is a conceptual error. The one-to-one relation of writer and reader is a different matter, in psychic and social senses, from the employment of people to enact fantasies.

Conclusions, *pro tempore*

I am not a swinger. I don't believe in pornography as a healthful reminder of the full genital life amidst a pallid and poky society, or as an extender of consciousness in any beneficial way. These views seem to me phony emancipation—in fact, a negation of the very fullness of life that is ostensibly being affirmed. Much better to concentrate on our sillinesses about the romanticized restrictions of love and the shortcomings of marriage, on the humiliations of both men and women in our rituals of courtship and bedding and wedding, that make pornography such a popular form of vengeance.

But the legal suppression of pornography seems to me anti-civil and anti-civilized (because it misses the anti-civilizing reasons for pornography), and also shows a failure in sense of humor. (If the idea of sex is funny, as it often is, the idea of porno is funniness multiplied.) I'm against censorship laws just as I'm against laws against certain kinds of sexual practice, or against any sexual practice between unmarried people, that still exist in many parts of this country. I want to be able to have porno if I want it. The purely personal opinion that I don't happen to want it very often should not be made the law of the land.

To put it entirely subjectively, I think that one way to cure my uneasiness on the subject of pornography is to repeal all the laws restricting it, except possibly the ones forbidding the advertising and sale to minors. The more mature the individual, the more he resents the idea of being forbidden something that affects him alone; and the more mature individuals there are, the better the polity.

In any event, pornography is here—most notably, these days, in film theaters. For years we've had skin-flicks, which show plenty of nudity and simulated ecstasy but never really show any kind of intercourse. In the last few months there has been an influx of films about pornography, which include a good deal of it. I've avoided them because, since I've seen some porno films, I thought I knew my reactions and rationalizations about a relatively standard product. But I had always seen it *privately*. The fact of theatrical exhibition seemed too pressing to ignore, so in two days recently, I saw four of these films.

All of them were made at least partially in Denmark. They celebrate that country's abolition of censorship in 1969, for anyone over sixteen, and they also deal with last year's Porno Fair in Copenhagen. They all purport to be documentaries, though some sequences are obviously rehearsed; all have English commentary and were presumably prepared for the United States. They take us to Copenhagen porno shops, where topless salesgirls sell sex films, sex implements, sex records, sex books and magazines. (Sample magazine cover: a close-up of a girl performing fellatio on two men at once.) They take us to apartments where sex films are being made; and to "sex clubs" (memberships easily obtainable) that feature striptease, porno films, and live sexual performances by all sorts of combinations except male homosexuals. In one of these clubs, toward the end of the show the girls select men from the audience, take them up on stage, and massage and mouth their organs. All sexual activity is shown, not merely suggested.

For the U.S., all the activities are not presented as "direct" porno, in Danish style; they are shown as evidence, as parts of a report on modern Denmark, along with comment on Danish history, law, and the lately diminished sex-crime rate. (All four documentaries are wretched pieces of filmmaking.) By far the frankest film is *Censorship in Denmark*—as it's called on the marquee; on the screen it's called *Pornography in Denmark* (1970). Many kinds of genital conjunction and manual and oral ingenuity are seen in close-up. It also features a sequence of a film being made of a couple copulating, with withdrawal at the finish so that ejaculation is visible. This last, according to the calmly informative commentator, is a requisite of Danish porno, to prove bona fides.

A few points about the other films. *Wide Open Copenhagen 1970* (1970) features a Swedish girl who lives in Malmö with her husband and two small children and who commutes by ferry to Copenhagen, where she copulates with a man in a club five nights a week. (On the night of the filming, the man was tired from

a previous performance and another girl was added, making a trio, to help stimulate him.) In *Sexual Freedom in Denmark* (1970) some of the film is devoted to “educational” illustrations of sexual positions, with close-ups of insertions, while a magisterial commentator refers to coitus as if it were spelled coy-tus. *Freedom to Love* (1969), which was prepared by the sex specialists Drs. Eberhard and Phyllis Kronhausen, wanders around the world. In addition to documentary scenes from Denmark and other countries, there are scenes from frank plays—Michael McClure’s *The Beard* (1965), from the U.S., and John Mortimer’s amusing British sketch titled *Word Play* (1963). This film includes more sexual subjects than pornography and ends with a large orgy to which one married couple take another married couple as a way of preserving a threatened marriage.

The Kronhausens make large sounds about dedication and honesty, but their sincerity becomes a bit threadbare in a sequence with two little girls aged about ten and thirteen. While playing in a garden, they peek through a window and see two lesbians busily engaged. Then the children go to a bedroom, strip, and mimic the lesbian activity they have just seen, while one of the Drs. Kronhausen tells us on the soundtrack that such mimicry is natural and harmless if parents don’t make too much of it. Perhaps so; but as a lady said to me when I described the sequence to her, that scene must have been rehearsed and re-shot several times, filmmaking being what it is, and what happened then to the natural and spontaneous mimicry of those two children?

These four films shocked me—because I could walk in off the New York street and see them. (They have no MPAA ratings; admission is simply restricted to those twenty-one and over.) In other countries, other customs; shock is a matter of place and time, and in New York, this month, those pictures shocked me, by their availability. They make no pretense of being erotic art, as, at a humble level, the motion picture *I Am Curious, Yellow* (1967) was. These films are sheerly sexual functions; they extol pornography as physically and morally desirable, and they praise Copenhagen as the Rome of a new church. (The Danes may not be too happy if other countries follow their lead because pornography now seems to be for them what postage stamps are for Liechtenstein, a great source of revenue from foreigners—West Germans and Americans, particularly.

As I noted earlier, literary pornography, of which we have had much in recent years and which has become the subject of aesthetic discussion, is a quite different matter, experientially, because it proceeds from a solo imagination to another individual. Film (or stage) porno is done by at least two people in front of an audience. The presence of real people really doing those things—not words set down by one person on paper—and the presence of people around us, watching with us and perhaps watching us watch, these factors all make tremendous breaches in privacy. And that is the essence of performed porno (as against written or drawn

pornography). It consists of *doing* publicly what is usually done privately. Its special powers lie in the fact of that publicness. It has none of the imaginative or humanist aims of erotic art, even when it employs fictional forms, which it does sometimes. It is a deliberate assault on privacies, and in that revolution, that rupture of acceptances, lies its stimulation.

There's a good deal of cant about porno films, how they assuage loneliness, and so on. My guess is that the stimulation, the excitement of the publicness, has two main effects. First, it provides impulse and fantasy for masturbation, sometimes later, sometimes sooner. (It's a common joke about what goes on in the men's rooms of porno theaters, sometimes in the seats.) Second, probably lesser, it provides impulse—and possibly examples—for later sexual contacts with others. (So, in a broad sense, it *is* educational.) I don't think that either of these results is arbitrarily immoral. The first may be unattractive, but few would think it "wrong." The second, so far as we know, does not include sex crime—rape, etc. But the girls in those Copenhagen sex clubs who take customers on stage and produce orgasms in them are a lot more honest than the porno apologists who talk about sexual health and the relief of loneliness.

Another important point, lost in the high-sounding talk: pornography is made for men. Some women interviewed in Copenhagen professed an interest in it, and some women were visible in one of the sex-club audiences, but, overwhelmingly, porno is for men. Simple proof: women have to be paid more to do it. The Danish film producers tell us that men will work for half of what they have to pay women, and sometimes the men work for nothing, which no woman ever does. Clearly, far from being universally desired like intercourse, pornography is a function of a world dominated by men. Not just the Western world—all cultures. If men lost their political and social and economic dominance, pornography would disappear as sexual relations would not. So much for the "naturalness" of porno.

I disbelieve the scientific apologia, and I despise the apostolic organ-tones adduced for the U.S. (Several of the commentators boast that the Danes themselves, as opposed to tourists, are less interested in pornography, now that it is continuously available. Curious. If it's good for people, why boast that interest in it has lessened?) But porno films exist, and now, in sanctified trappings, they are in theaters; and this is chiefly significant, I think, as another strong symptom of a larger phenomenon: the change in concepts of privacy. Those concepts are linked closely and basically to concepts of society itself. I doubt that these porno films, and the others which will follow and which I do nothing to stop, are going to debauch America; their effect may be much more important, in longer and larger range, than sexual stimulation or model. They may be part of a slow general revision of ideas on how and why communities exist. Napoleon said that he heard the approach of the Revolution's tumbrils in Figaro's fifth-act soliloquy from

Beaumarchais's *Marriage of Figaro* (1784). Is it fanciful, I wonder, to hear some sort of distant rumble in the fact that former very strict privacies are now very public in New York?

"Film Negatives" (*Saturday Review*, 3 March 1973)

I'm tired—and hope you are, too—of the recurrent article in which the writer, usually a professional literary person, takes a look at the film scene and finds it wanting. He says in effect that he has been hearing a great deal about film as the New Art, so he has finally consented to go to five or ten current successful films and has found them pretentious or distorted or cheap. Imagine the sort of article that would result if a non-literary person, after hearing a lot about the art of the novel, then did nothing more than read any ten current best sellers.

But I do want to play devil's advocate against film for a bit: partly because I dislike the sort of article described above, which finds what it sets out to find; partly because I'm one of those who have hailed the power and importance of film. I'm still hailing, but I have some worries.

Certainly no one needs to prove the high degree of interest in film. Although the audience is smaller than it was twenty-five or thirty years ago, there are plentiful reasons to believe that qualitatively it is stratospheres beyond the pre-World War II audience that went to film theaters once or twice a week like automobiles to filling stations. Today's audience has much more knowledge about its enthusiasm. Just because of this distilled and intensified film furor, proved further by the flood of film books in recent years, I thought this might be a good time for one film enthusiast to take a cool look at that furor—*because* of his enthusiasm. Here are notes on some aspects of film that have been bothering me for a while.

Filmgoing is too easy

I'm not talking about admission prices or the widespread availability of film. I mean the frame of mind.

I mean that it is easier to see a film than to read a book—easier even than to listen to some music. I don't suggest that, if something is easy, it is automatically bad, but this particular ease is frequently taken as proof in itself that film is more apposite to our times than other arts, is richer and more rewarding. There are reasons why film *is* especially apposite for us, but this ease isn't one of them. In one of his novels Edward Hyams writes that the real objection to brothels is that they make us emotionally lazy. There is something of a whorehouse feeling about this film ease, a whiff of lazy gratification in the darkness.

I'm not inveighing against pleasure in filmgoing—not after all the pleasures I've had from it in five decades—nor against the enjoyment of all kinds of films, even some bad ones. I'm concerned about the assumption that there is an absolute equivalence between plunking one's behind into a film-theater seat and a serious cultural act, that the first always and invariably equals the second; more, that the act of attending a film subsumes all other possible cultural and intellectual acts; even more, that it certifies one's contemporaneity.

Only cultural blockheads try to turn clocks backward, and if (as is said) college students now see twenty films for every book they read, then that preference is the product of current pressures and hungers and must be recognized as a cultural condition. Progress can be made *from* that condition, not against it. But culture is a word with both a sociological and an aesthetic meaning. The “twenty-to-one” fact, if it is a fact, can be recognized sociologically without being exalted aesthetically. Seeing a Humphrey Bogart series at a film society is an experience that no one should either miss or condescend to, but it's aesthetic sloth to believe that seeing the Bogart series is a priestly act on the slopes of Parnassus simply because one has done it in the Film Age.

From the same seat we see both junk films and good films, but in a way good films reprove us for indiscriminate rump-plumping. Good films ask us to do something in that seat, make demands on us, help dispel that brothel lethargy (without destroying pleasure). Good films, from *Swing Time* (1936) with Fred Astaire to Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), show us that there is more to film culture than film slavishness, that we are cultural trespassers if we have no values, and that values are formed (a) within the art and (b) by comparison with other arts. As for the first, it is Fred Astaire who teaches us that the most we can get from Busby Berkeley are the slumming pleasures of camp—which means a very easily earned sense of superiority. As for the second, if you don't know Mozart, you don't know Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939). If you don't know Strindberg, you don't know Bergman. If you don't know Frederic Remington, you don't know John Ford.

Film slavishness today is a worse narcotic than the shopgirl-shoeclerk escapism of Joan Crawford's heyday because now it has a pietistic rationale. Today the person who submerges himself in B movies of the 1930s tells us that he isn't like the first audiences for those pictures: he is investigating American culture. This would be equally true if he burrowed through Faith Baldwin novels of the period. Not that such things as Baldwin research are unheard of, but they are much less appealing because they—even they—are more difficult than just watching films and lack the inherent power of the lowest film. Film has a wide range of magics, and one of them is that it *can* transmute junk—to a degree—into something better than it could be in any other art. But that alchemy is limited. Not to see where it ends and how it can be abused is film blindness. In 1942 Orson Welles elevated Booth Tarkington's

The Magnificent Ambersons (1918) into a film that is artistic stratospheres above the original novel, but all his huffing and puffing on *Touch of Evil* (1958) only emphasized the vacuous melodrama of Whit Masterson's 1956 book.

I suggest that any person, particularly a young person, who thinks that a slump in a film-theater seat with his feet up will bring his mind all it needs for growth and his spirit all it needs for challenge is more interested in the position itself—a near fetal one—than in what he is getting through it. How to share all the miracles and possibilities of film without making a joke of the medium or a fool of yourself—that is becoming a cultural question of some importance.

Filmmaking is too easy

By which, obviously, I don't mean the raising of capital or the production of a good film. I mean that the basic act of motion-picture photography is relatively easy—and is deluding.

It's easier to take a good photograph of a tree than to make a good drawing of a tree or write a good sentence about one. It's easier to assemble a film, particularly a short one, that has some superficial resemblance to art than it is to paint a picture or write a story that produces equivalent effects. Color photography has now made the matter worse; any fool can now ladle lush beauty over anything. (See such vacuous professional productions as *Greaser's Palace* [1972] and *Images* [1972].)

All this makes an aesthetic problem that is disturbing intelligent film teachers in colleges, even in high schools. The easiness described above leads to quick self-satisfaction, and a teacher sometimes finds it hard to convince a student that there is more to a film than making it look good, that all of the physical world is aching to "act," that physicality is actually quite hammy, that the film camera provides easy outlets for that hamminess, and that the person who merely presses a camera button can take relatively little credit.

Films have to *begin further on*, aesthetically, than other arts because they take the first steps so easily. This is certainly not to say that, after those first steps, the film travels further than other arts; it rarely travels as far. But film starts with enormous representational power, enormous symbolic power, just by virtue of its innate properties. All film stuns us, at least for a second or two, just by being flashed in front of us; and the fact that any film student or mere film wallower can use that stunning effect to some degree proves little about him. For four years I looked at about 150 student films a year, from all over the country. I saw much that was technically competent and much more that was briefly eye-catching, but I saw few films that moved past competence, past initial effects. Most of them seemed content just to *be* films! Filmmaking is susceptible of being the greatest con game

in the history of the arts, uniquely dangerous in that it often deceives the maker more than the audience.

Here's a grossly simple analogy: The crossbar in pole-vaulting is much higher than in high jumping. This doesn't mean that the pole-vaulter is the better athlete, only that he has an initial advantage. The critical question for film is: What does the filmmaker do after his initial advantage?

The odds are heavy today against a new art

By the beginning of the twentieth century, when film started, was it too late in the history of Western culture to begin a new art? To anticipate, my answer is no; but the question is central and well worth examining.

The older arts all entered the twentieth century with huge bodies of work behind them, including supreme masterpieces. Cultural changes in six decades have smitten them hard, have made many artists believe that the dominant modes in their arts are finished: the mimetic novel, the designed painting, the literary drama, music made by traditional instruments, and so on. Buttressed by their ancient histories, these arts have nonetheless been shaken.

Right in the middle of this cultural tempest, a new art, an infant without a history of its own, was born.

Its newness is, in one way, an advantage. If film lacks the confidence that a past can provide, it is spared the burden on its back that a past can also be. But in addition to its infancy, in addition to the batterings of twentieth-century change, the film has a unique problem. The money needs of filmmaking, and therefore the pressures on filmmakers from outsiders, have always been horrendous, and promise to continue so. Money pressures exist throughout the world of film, even in countries with systems of film subsidy, even in communist countries where the film industry belongs to the state. In the United States the problems caused by money pressures have varied: from the formulas imposed by the factory assembly lines in the humming Hollywood days to—paradoxically—the *lack* of factory routine today, which leaves producers baffled and money men floundering. The causes change, but the money harassments are constant—greater than in any other art.

One might have thought that the Film Generation, first discernible in the late 1950s, would make a difference to the course and development of American film art, even in the midst of all these difficulties. One might have hoped for this particularly within a decade or so because of the tremendous growth in film education. Between 1964 and 1969 the number of college film courses in the United States increased by 84%. The latest American Film Institute (AFI) survey (1971–72) reports that there are 2,460 teachers of film and allied subjects like television at

613 schools, that there are 22,466 students at the 194 schools that offer extensive programs, and that of those schools fifty-one offer degrees in film. This would have sounded like fantasy in 1960.

And what, so far, has been the effect of all this education in filmmaking? Production is the most important aspect of study in all these programs. How has it helped the new art of this century of crisis? Not very much. Most of the films now being made reflect a technical sophistication that is miles ahead of 1960, but the quality of theatrical feature films, which are the heart of the matter, has not in any serious, sustained sense benefited from the astronomical rise in film education. The range of subject matter has widened healthily, and there have been occasional good films from new people. But, ironically, the most interesting of the newcomers have not come from film schools—such directors of widely differing ages and temperaments as Barbara Loden (*Wanda* [1970]), Peter Fonda (*The Hired Hand* [1971]), and Frank Gilroy (*Desperate Characters* [1971]). There have been successful film school graduates; in fact, the most successful picture in history, *The Godfather* (1972), was directed by former UCLA student Francis Ford Coppola. Still, for all its slickness, what is *The Godfather* but a film that made many people mistake length for size and that reveled in previously established artistic limits? And what can be expected from Coppola but more, perhaps bigger, successes?

Film education so far seems to reflect, to underscore, the strengths and defects of American life: the ability to master technology and the belief that this mastery is the reason for the existence of the technology. Just as many music school graduates know more about orchestration than Brahms ever dreamed of, so the film school graduate knows more of film technique than Jean Vigo did. But the questions do not often arise about why he has bothered to learn it, who the person is that has learned the technique, what relation there can be between the art medium and the transformation of his own experience. Compare this situation with the records of some new foreign directors of the past decade, men whose acquisition of technique seems to have been accompanied by other enrichments, all of which have been married to artistic purpose: such men as Jan Troell (*The Emigrants* [1971]), Dušan Makaveyev (*Love Affair* [1967]), Marco Bellocchio (*China Is Near* [1967]), and Alain Tanner (*La Salamandre* [1971]).

There are no AFI statistics about the employment of film school graduates, but given economic conditions, it seems logical to assume that many have gone into television, and into TV's busiest area, the commercial. Take a careful look at the next commercial you see that comes from a big national sponsor. (Stanley Kubrick reportedly said that he couldn't afford to spend proportionately on a feature what is spent on such a commercial—often more than \$100,000 a minute.) Count the cuts and dissolves. That's step one, and will itself probably amaze you. The next time you see it—and you'll see it again—note the zoom shots, the crane

and dolly shots, the helicopter shots, the opticals, the split screens, the special effects, and, most of all, the subtlety of the lighting. In sum, you are watching a highly compressed encyclopedia of film language: of film techniques and film “vision” evolved by good men and by great men in pursuit of good storytelling or pursuit of an art, all now being cleverly utilized by an army of well-trained vicarious salesmen. And that army must, logic tells us, include many film school graduates. In itself, this is merely predictable on a statistical basis, just as a lot of art school graduates end up in advertising agencies; but there are other art school graduates who are doing a great deal for American painting, and that’s where the analogy with film breaks down.

Inarguably, it’s harder to get started as a film director than as a painter. That condition has to be changed, for all our sakes. I’m not going to try to slough off this enormously complex dilemma in one glib paragraph. But there are ideas in the wind at least to help the situation—for instance, ideas about subsidy and new techniques of distribution. And what I’m particularly talking about is not the situation but the willingness of so many film school graduates (on the basis of what I see and am told) to *accept* it. Who’s going to change the situation if they don’t?

Still, without any willed affirmation, my prognosis has to be cheery. The long-range reply to the gloomy statement that opened the last section is no, it is not too late to start a new art—not because I say so but on the evidence. That evidence simply is that there are many, many fine films. They exist. It can be done because it has been done.

No film that I know has reached the greatest heights of art, if greatness means something more than its use in the lingo of film journals, if it means Shakespeare and Michelangelo and Mozart. But when you remember that film is so young, so beleaguered by the century into which it popped, so harassed by commercial pressures everywhere, and *still* has produced so many fine works in seventy years, you must feel optimistic. You must feel that it was important to civilization that film be invented and that anything still possible to art is possible to film.

Some of those fine works came from America; most of the world’s film images and mythology and impetus came from America. Nothing can be done by film that—in any final arbitrary sense—cannot be done by American film. The trouble so far is not so much that high expectations have been disappointed as that low expectations have been fulfilled.

“Andrezj Wajda” (*The New Republic*, 3 November 1979)

Permit a small self-quotation. “The slang term ‘small-town genius’ seems appropriate to Wajda. He has seen a lot of films, is honorably ambitious, and is not

untalented, but he lacks taste and originality.” That was in a review of Andrezej Wajda’s trilogy, consisting of *A Generation* (1954), *Kanał* (1956), and *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), in *The New Republic* of June 12, 1961. This Polish director now has a high international standing: two of his latest films were shown at the recent New York Film Festival, and a third had a special engagement elsewhere. A fourth was shown last winter at the Film Forum. I saw them all, and my present opinion of Wajda grows, but does not differ, from what I thought eighteen years ago. Wajda has now, quite evidently, the confidence that comes from extensive experience (he also directs in the theater) and from praise. To me, he is still honorably ambitious, still concerned with art that flourishes out of social tensions; also, he is still maladroit in method and selection, imitative, “unrecognizable” except in his excesses and faults.

Landscape after Battle (1970) is based on the short story “The Battle of Grunwald” from the 1959 collection *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, by Tadeusz Borowski, a taciturn, chilling—can one say “gentle”?—book about Auschwitz and after. For every reticence of Borowski’s, Wajda substitutes emphasis: heavy sorrowing, dilation of horrors, camera platitudes, so that all I could think of was Wajda’s heart and sleeve. (I know that Wajda fought with the Resistance as a youth. That fact seems to me an especially bitter comment on his work, his inability to transmute such firsthand experience into good art.)

Without Anesthesia (a.k.a. *Rough Treatment*, 1978) is a metaphoric, perhaps binary, film: the story of the breakup of a fifteen-year marriage through which we are meant to get a view of the effects of political dissidence in Poland. Much has been said about the film’s surprising frankness in its politics, but I’ve seen at least equivalent frankness in Hungarian and Yugoslavian films. In each case either the trouble is put in the past so that the present government looks benevolent, or else, as in this film, the trouble is so murky that the government risks nothing by being lenient. Politically *Without Anesthesia* doesn’t say much more than that one can be in favor or disfavor, arbitrarily: the politics of the protagonist, a journalist-teacher, is not clear. But then neither is the marital split. The wife suddenly departs for a younger man without even leaving her address, and she takes their child with her. Why does she behave in this abrupt and cruel way, to a husband who clearly loves her? We never find out. His death at the end, through the explosion of a faulty stove, has nothing to do with his character, their situation, his politics. It’s just a glibly ironic snapper. But this is the best-directed film of Wajda’s that I know. Fairly subtly, many of the scenes of mere dailiness are composed to suggest closure, confinement. And the performances avoid the Wajda vein of broadness; for once his actors draw with fine lines, not with felt pens.

Not so in *The Girls of Wilko* (1979). This is Wajda’s “Chekhov” picture, only he gives us five sisters instead of three. A melancholy man, made more so by the

death of a close friend, goes to stay with his aunt and uncle at their farm. Nearby is a country house where, since it is summer, the members of a large family are gathered: the five sisters, some of them married. Before the war—it's now 1929—the man had been a frequent visitor to that house and had loved one of the sisters, now dead. (There were six originally.) Now he goes over nostalgically for lunches, teas, parties; cleans up the grave of the dead sister; sleeps with one of the married ones. There is much reminiscence, much sighing, much laughing among the sisters as a signal that they are really sad, much pain bursting through the crevices of routine—all patently derived from Chekhov. Some of Gorky's plays plainly owe their impetus to Chekhov, but though much inferior to their source of inspiration, they are sturdy with Gorky's integrity. In *The Girls of Wilko*, nothing goes deeper than mannerism: it's like a platitudinous director's idea of a Chekhov production applied to an inferior script—sighings and sentimental music. (By the way, would a well-bred Pole drop a cigar in the hallway of a house where he is a guest and squash it with his shoe?) Again Wajda italicizes tastelessly: his cinematographer, Edward Klosinski, has opened up the lens stop so that the film looks overexposed and "light," and so that halations glimmer around figures. Virtually every frame is labeled Poignant Idyll.

But the worst of the four films is the longest. *Land of Promise* (1974) is a three-hour derivation from a novel translated in 1928 as *The Promised Land*, originally published in 1899. The author is Władysław Reymont, one of those Nobel laureates whose names even literate people don't know. (Read any Karl Gjellerup lately? Or Verner von Heidenstam?) The story chronicles the business-love adventures of three young friends in Lodz in the 1890s—a Polish German, a Polish Jew, and a Polish Pole (if that's the right phrase), the last being the central figure. For negative reasons the picture can't be called anti-Semitic: its treatment of non-Jews is almost equally harsh. The main story has reminders of Jack Clayton's film *Room at the Top* (1959)—a young man so desperate for success that he marries a rich girl whom he doesn't like.

The atmosphere is well-enough evoked, and, so far as one can tell, the generally despicable characters are realistically written. But the performances! The villains leer, the Jewish businessmen drool, the stupid rich girl is like the village idiot in a bad Slavic play. And Wajda's direction seems frantic to impress. Whenever he wants to show a time lapse, he shoves in the belching smokestacks of Lodz. Whenever he goes to a country estate, he gives us shimmering leaves and sentimental music. When a sensual woman dines grandly, he almost shoves us down her gullet to prove her gluttony. When there's trouble in the streets, the camera gets erratically hand-held. When a stone is thrown by workers through a rich man's window, the camera plunks to floor level for a distorted close-up of the stone spinning on the floor—to make sure we know what happened. (Camera

distortions are a feature of the film.) It's all the camera equivalent of ham acting. The only tolerable character is the doting girl whom the adventurer declines to marry. Wajda plunges us into this almost unrelieved swamp of cynicism and greed to show us capitalism naked, I guess; but the result is *un*-naked, swaddled by his mannerisms.

He is often called the preeminent Polish director. Having no extraordinary knowledge of Polish films and admittedly having seen only eleven of Wajda's twenty-three to date, I nonetheless can think of three Polish films that I prefer to any of those eleven: Roman Polanski's *Knife in the Water* (1962), Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Mother Joan of the Angels* (1961), and (never released in the U.S.) Tadeusz Konwicki's *The Last Day of Summer* (1958). Compared with them, and certainly compared with the best in the rest of the world, Wajda is far from the first rank, still a well-intentioned, energetically eclectic, somewhat loutish provincial.

"Note on the Auteur Theory" (*The New Republic*, 1 November 1980)

Jean-Luc Godard has been making a stir at press conferences, in New York and elsewhere, by stating that the *auteur* theory, of which he was a leading voice, was fabricated by him and others in the early days of the French New Wave "just to protect ourselves." Well, François Truffaut, once close to Godard and now estranged, said five years ago that the *auteur* theory "is forgotten in France, but still discussed in American periodicals." I, always a dissident from the *auteur* theory, think these disclaimers have to be taken at something more than face value, as efforts to escape pigeonhole (Truffaut) or revise the past (Godard). Besides, the *auteur* view—essentially a reordering of critical priorities to make the director's contribution decisive—did a limited corrective service against the ignoring or ignorance of the director's contribution. But what about the fanatical *auteurists* who took every Godard-Truffaut burp as gospel? What are they to do now that canon law has been blasted? How are they to revise their pasts, or persist past the blasting?

I couldn't help thinking of myself *vis-à-vis* a cartoon that appeared in the *New Yorker* some years ago when the Vatican altered its law against meat-eating on Friday. The scene is Hell, with the Devil on his throne and an assistant devil approaching out of the flames beyond. The assistant asks: "Say, boss, what are we going to do with all those people who ate meat on Friday?" Well, I don't suppose there's any chance that we cinematic meat-eaters will be pardoned.

"Julien Duvivier" (*The New Republic*, 27 January 1982)

A set of stereotypes—thinning out after twenty years, I'm glad to say—was foisted on us by *auteurist* film criticism, which flourished in this country with the rise of the French New Wave around 1960. A chief tenet of *auteurism* was the quasi-Calvinist belief in the "election" of the saved by *auteurist* critics; the "elect" directors would always do work of at least some merit, and nothing of real merit could ever come from the damned who had been cast aside. Among the latter was Julien Duvivier. In 1964, when I was in Paris as part of a long European-film exploration, I asked the French Film Office to fix a meeting for me with Duvivier, who was then living there. Eyes glazed by current chic, they couldn't understand why I wanted to see this "grandpa" of French cinema. I insisted; they complied.

When we met, I told Duvivier that I had come to pay a debt. His film *Poil de carotte* (his second, sound version made in 1932; the silent one is from 1925) was not literally the first foreign film I had seen, but it had opened up dimensions different from the American films I loved and still love. I had wanted the chance to thank him. Later *La Fin du Jour* (1939), which I had not seen since its first New York engagement in 1939, lived on in my mind as a beauty. He melted. He crossed his luxurious living room, opened a cabinet, and pointed to a few cans of film. He said that he had made some sixty films—he was then sixty-seven, and he died three years later—and *La Fin du jour* was the only one of which he kept a print in his home.

Thanks to the retrospective of French film arranged by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), I've now had a chance to see the film again. (Part One of that retrospective, including *La Fin du jour*, is now touring some cities.) I went to it with the customary nervousness of a belated revisit, and very soon knew that what I had remembered was, is, a masterpiece. It takes place in a home for old actors, but the sentiment you might expect is kept very much in the background, which is a subtler touch than eliminating it completely, while the foreground is held by two bitter stories centering on two great actors, Louis Jouvet and Victor Francen, strongly aided by the flavorsome Michel Simon.

I can't recall ever having seen *La Fin Jour* scheduled at a revival house in New York, and there is no 16mm print listed in any rental catalogue I know. I hope that the MOMA show helps to shake some of the two-decade stereotypes about French film. I saw again another Duvivier film, *La Belle équipe* (1936), in the series and thought it poor; but that hardly seems to support New Wave theories of predestination. Isn't it time to reexamine *La Fin du Jour* and a lot of other dispraised and praised films on their merits alone?

"On Screenwriters: Credits and Discredits"

(*The New Republic*, 26 December 1988)

David Puttnam made a grim statement recently (reported in *Variety*). Puttnam, who was for a few years the head at Columbia Pictures, is now the head of a consortium for which he is to produce at least six films. Speaking about British screenwriting in London, where he is based, he said that in the past year on his new job, he has received 550 scripts, two of which were "memorable." The rest were "mediocre." The mediocre, or worse, always outnumber the memorable, but Puttnam's report is startling from the country that in recent years has given us *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), *Wish You Were Here* (1987), *Withnail and I* (1987), *Sid and Nancy* (1986), and *Rita, Sue, and Bob Too* (1987), among others.

His comment reminds us that, even in a thriving film community, a worldwide condition prevails. Screenwriting lags behind every other aspect of filmmaking. It has always lagged behind. Directing, acting, cinematography, design, and the other components of film have always been more dependably good than writing. Week after week in my reviewing, I note films in which all the elements except the scripts are commendable. I can think of only one recent example in which the script seemed the best element in the picture: Peter Handke's screenplay for *Wings of Desire* (1987).

Here is one inferable reason for the worldwide imbalance: writing for performance (this applies to the theater, too) is more difficult than any other element in performance. Still, fixed though this condition is, the problem worries. Some specifics about our current screenwriting—I'll limit myself to the United States rather than take on the entire globe—therefore need to be examined.

Is American screenwriting worse than it used to be? No and yes. No, because since the beginning, our screenwriting has predominantly been an industrial function. Collaborations had always existed in drama and fiction, but collaboration acquired a quite different meaning when the film studios were organized and tooled up. In a valuable collection of historical essays called *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985), Janet Staiger describes how by 1913 the writing of screenplays in the studios had developed along assembly-line principles, with "some workers excelling in creating stories, others in rewriting. ... It was customary by the early '20s for scripts to travel through several writers or groups of writers." When sound arrived and dialogue was wanted, the person who wrote it, often imported from the East, was called a word man, as I was once told by a word man.

This assembly-line system remained in place as long as there were studios operating like factories. (Before we snoot down from Olympus, let's remember that almost all the movies we cherish from the Hollywood Golden Age came from

those factories.) The collaborative system still persists to a degree in these days of independent production, though the teams are *ad hoc*, not staff employees. The *ad hoc* collaboration doesn't give the writers the same firmament they once worked under, and it deprives films of the studio hallmarks they once had, but it can't be said that the current level of writing—particularly of dialogue—is worse than the prevailing level in the studio era. In flexibility of diction, in verity, it's usually better.

But in another view, in the view from post-studio days, screenwriting is worse now. In the postwar years huge changes took place. First, the studios dwindled away because, among other reasons, television exploded. Some of the old names still flourish—Paramount, Warner, MGM, Columbia—but they don't represent studios, each turning out dozens of films a year; they are mostly incubators and distributors for independent producers, who make pictures only when they find ones they can make.

Second, outstanding new foreign films flooded into the consciousness of some Americans in the turbulent 1960s, especially younger ones around universities, and helped to create a phenomenon that I called the Film Generation. This generation, without disavowing the best achievements of Hollywood—in fact, with increased appreciation of them—pressed for American films to emulate those European and Japanese films, to develop an “art cinema.” That's the phrase used by Staiger and David Bordwell in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, defined thus: “The art cinema is concerned less with action than with reaction; it is a cinema of psychological effects in search of their causes. ... Realism and authorial expressivity [are] the means whereby the art film unifies itself.”

The postwar art cinema eventually affected American mainstream production because some of the younger people touched by it came into the film world, and because film producers wanted to reach that newly stirred Film Generation. So, beginning around 1970, for a dozen years or so, we got such films as *The Hire Hand* (1971), *Pocket Money* (1972), *Wanda* (1970), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), and *The Conversation* (1974)—along with hundreds of routine works, of course. Certainly many of the screenplays of these “new” films were collaborations and rewrites (often with more people involved than were credited), but they seemed whole-souled and personal, in search of “causes” rather than “effects,” because they were not begun with a studio quota as a reason for being and with the writers' assembly line as a given part of the process.

In this decade, however—the 1980s—the impulse toward an American art cinema has faltered, chiefly because expenses have zoomed. Today the average cost of a technically first-class film is from \$15 to \$20 million, astronomically more than what it was in 1970. Producers, quite understandably, want to reach the widest possible audience. The result is that the spirit of adventure that to some extent

flourished for a while in American films—and that began with the writing of those films—has now become shackled.

So American screenwriting today is twice bereft. It lacks the sense of residence and program that the full-functioning studio once gave it, and it no longer has a chance for 1970s heterodoxy. Of course we still get some good entertainments; less often we get a film that defies prevailing straitened circumstances: say, *Housekeeping* (1987), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *House of Games* (1987), or *Far North* (1988). But veristic though the dialogue is, most American screenwriting now seems a bid at a roulette table, neither slick engineering for a reliable audience nor personal conviction.

Will the present situation change? Well, we shouldn't look to the filmmakers for change; we should look to the film public. Filmmakers, except for the merest handful, don't lead: they try to respond and follow. Unless the public shows signs of discontent with the run of the mill, the mill will keep running, and screenwriters will continue to provide grist for it. Change in the public is less likely to come for aesthetic reasons than for societal ones. Though the Film Generation was greatly impressed by the cinematic quality of postwar foreign films, it was even more impressed by their unconstrained treatment of relevant subject matter, from the deeply personal, even the subjective, to the political. Social interests and unease may again filter through the American public until they reach the West Coast.

It may seem overly sanguine to hope for such social sensitization at a time when half the electorate doesn't vote and the majority of the other half votes for a government (whatever the political party) pledged to continue a rule of complacency. Yet the sedated Eisenhower years were followed by a much more volatile decade. Besides, in life, as in art, we have to rely on the exceptions, the unpredictable. Heightened dissatisfactions, spiritual and temporal, may lead to an anger against films that don't deal with current troubles in any significant way, and this anger may lead to film-world response. So even though the American film road ahead looks rather bland and smooth—to paraphrase the Joseph L. Mankiewicz line from *All About Eve* (1950)—let's fasten our seatbelts and hope for a bumpy ride.

"Film Preservation" (*The New Republic*, 23 July 1990)

Preservation is now a prime word in the world's lexicon. Lately, belatedly, attention is facing paid to the desolation of natural and man-made wonders: forests, rivers, cities. In our time the title of Thomas Otway's tragedy *Venice Preserved* (1682) takes on another meaning. I read recently that in the Library of Congress, the largest library in the world, books are crumbling into dust at a rate of more than 200 volumes a day and that preservation plans are now in hand.

A word, please, for films. Here is a blunt shocker from *Daily Variety* of April 17th last:

Half of all films made in the U.S. before the 1950 introduction of acetate safety film have already been lost forever, and the remaining nitrate footage ... is inexorably decaying and must be transferred to safety stock (at \$1–2 per foot) as soon as possible.

For a notion of the expense, the film archive at the University of California, Los Angeles, alone has twenty-five million feet of nitrate film; all the U.S. archives are estimated to have a total of 100 million feet. And while we wait, while I write this and you read it, films are turning into dust, if they are not—as nitrate film can do—spontaneously combusting.

For those who may shrug at the loss of bygone Saturday-afternoon serials and soppy romances, a question. How many of the Library of Congress's twenty-one million volumes are first-class literature or scholarship? Who would like the job of deciding which volumes in that library should be allowed to disappear? Which is to say, who will volunteer to dispose of which portions of mankind's past?

For film, the subject is both the same and somewhat different. The differences are two. First, film as a medium is predominantly American—in the development of its technology and, even more distinctly, of its mythology. American responsibility for preservation ought therefore to lead. Second, there's a special bitterness in the fact that the film past is not remote; it almost all occurred in the twentieth century. Yet more than one film historian has said that it is easier to get materials for the study of ancient times than for the earliest days of film.

Robert Rosen, the director of the UCLA Film & Television Archives, says that some help has come to him from some studios but that “none does enough.” UCLA has the second-largest holdings of feature films after the Library of Congress (where a copy of every film is deposited for copyright purposes), and UCLA opinion ought to be given special weight because out of that archive have come the restoration and reconstitution of a number of significant films. Orson Welles's *Macbeth* (1948) was changed from a quasi joke to a powerful and important film through the restoration by Robert Gitt of UCLA.

Some encouragements. Paramount Pictures is completing two air-conditioned storage facilities for its films, one in Pennsylvania and one on the studio lot, and has been striking new prints of hundreds of its titles. The Film Foundation, a group dedicated to American film preservation, has been formed by eight well-known filmmakers: Martin Scorsese, who is the president, Woody Allen, Francis Ford Coppola, Stanley Kubrick, George Lucas, Sydney Pollack, and Robert Redford, together with an advisory council of archivists. Scorsese said (*Daily Variety*, May 2nd) that “a major impetus for the foundation ... was the discovery that the

original negative no longer exists for even a modern classic such as Kubrick's 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*."

The goal is to raise at least \$30 million for film preservation. Already Universal has promised one million dollars a year to the foundation for lab costs in restoring fifty of its own films, and messages of support have come from other studios. Said Steven Spielberg: "We'd be very happy to take some of these well-wishing, wonderful telegrams from studios and convert them into cash later."

In my view preservation is a much more urgent cause than the campaign against colorization. Colorization is a disgrace, but it doesn't destroy the originals. I hope that all those who were so outraged by the coloring of films for television—but who had rarely said a word about the previous cutting, interruptions, or frame-size alterations for TV—will be at least as active in this campaign.

The situation is not notably better abroad. Fire has already done some devastation there. In 1980 one of the warehouses of the French Cinémathèque was destroyed in a few minutes. In 1981 the entire collection in the Mexico City archive was quickly incinerated, and a year later the same disaster struck the Koblenz archive in West Germany.

Last year the Royal Film Archive of Belgium published a brochure called *Films in Distress*, written by Lenny Borger, an American on the *Variety* staff in Paris. (I'm indebted to Borger for much of the information in this article.) He noted that in the 1980s consciousness had been raised considerably about the preservation crisis (he cited the efforts of the American Film Institute) but added that only "a few film producing and archiving nations such as Sweden and the Eastern bloc countries ... can today boast of having nearly completed their nitrate to acetate transfer program."

Elsewhere Borger raises another important question—one that literary scholars would call textual integrity. Example: Renoir's *Rules of the Game*. Scenes were excised, by Renoir himself, after the stormy premiere in 1939. The original 105-minute negative was destroyed in an air raid on the Renault car factories near the Billancourt film studios in 1941; but after the war the original version was pieced together from various sources. A dupe negative of this restored version was lost in a lab fire in the 1970s. There remained a second dupe negative of the postwar restoration, which has been used for recent prints. But this second dupe is photographically inferior, markedly so. The Belgian archive has a fine print made from the good (now lost) first negative of the restored film, and unless all present prints are taken out of circulation and all future prints are derived from the Belgian print, filmgoers will forever see a version of a masterpiece that is twice removed photographically from the original.

This tortuous history is only one instance. Two years ago at the Jerusalem Film Festival I saw a beautiful, reconstituted print of Dreyer's much-lacerated

Passion of Joan of Arc (1928) that had been prepared by the French Cinémathèque. It had cost the Cinémathèque years of research and considerable money to bring just one film to the state that all films ought to enjoy. No computer printout is needed about the money required to assure the integrity and sheer physical safety for the world's film heritage.

Nowadays every artistic, intellectual, and humane activity is in sore need of funds. The practical question, then, is: amid so many rightful demands on public—and private—money, how far down on the list should the preservation and restoration of films be placed? I hope that those who control purse strings will consider what films have meant to them and can mean to later generations. Are we willing to disinherit the future, to deprive it of what the twentieth century has achieved in the most important new art form of the century?

"Harold Lloyd" (*The New Republic*, 31 May 1993)

In March 1962 I got one of the major thrills of my film-reviewing life. Harold Lloyd sent me a letter. I had reviewed a composite film he had just issued, *Harold Lloyd's World of Comedy* (1962), made up of short and long sequences from some of his films, and had loved it:

Talk about Good Old Days is usually a disguised lament for lost youth, but sometimes the talk is demonstrably true, as with records of past opera singers and with films of silent-picture comics. Harold Lloyd has made an anthology of some short and long sequences from a number of his films, equipped it with music and sound effects and commentary, and issued it as *Harold Lloyd's World of Comedy*; and it plunges us right back into some Good Old Days—a world of insane but flawless logic and of characters whose smallest reaction is large. Lloyd and his fellows looked at objects and actions, strained probability but not (often) possibility to bring about various combinations, and let an initial situation breed inevitable but surprising results. The sequence that starts with Harold's climbing the outside of a skyscraper has the virtuosity of a Tetrazzini record; you can't imagine how it can continue or finish, yet you know that anyone who was capable of beginning it *must* be able to finish it.

It is a very, very funny film. Children will laugh at it; adults will laugh and admire. The score sounds a bit heavy, the commentator reads aloud the titles that appear on the screen (for whom?), and they ought not to tell us again that the skyscraper sequence was done without process shots. (Then why does the background change?) But the collection is so delightful that it makes us ask: why a collection? Why not simply reissue the best Lloyd films with music and sound effects? Then we would get, among other things, the full flavor of the character he created: the eager, affectionate, non-physical man thrust into utterly physical situations, the hero with the blood of cowards in his veins. More! How about *Speedy*? It would do a lot for us all these days

to see Harold once again save the franchise of the horse-car line by completing the run before the deadline. (*The New Republic*, 19 March 1962)

Since I had wondered in my review why Lloyd hadn't simply reissued his best films, he wrote that several exhibitors had advised that this compilation "would be a better vehicle to reintroduce me to a generation that has never seen any of the Lloyd pictures before." It chilled my spine to think that there could be such a generation even during his lifetime.

Now the Film Forum in New York is doing some reintroducing of its own, a five-week-long Lloyd retrospective on the centennial anniversary of his birth. (Other cities, please copy.) The list runs from his earliest short, *Just Nuts* (1915) to *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* (1947). So far I've seen only the first bill, *The Kid Brother* (1927), which by some fluke I'd never seen before and which is delightful, and *Safety Last* (1923), long a treasure.

The chief reason Lloyd had written me was to answer some questions I had raised in my review about the famous human-fly sequence in *Safety Last*, in which he climbs up the façade of a skyscraper. The curious point about his answer is that he tried to perpetuate a myth that he had already revealed as untrue. He wrote me that the long sequence had been shot on five different buildings of increasing height; platforms, piled with mattresses, had been constructed, one story below him, with no railings. "In other words, if you should happen to fall to the platform, fall flat—don't roll."

But he had already given a much more believable account in a 1923 interview quoted by Tom Dardis in his biography of Lloyd titled *Harold Lloyd: The Man on the Clock* (1983). There he had said that his people had built sets—fake façades—on the roofs of buildings of increasing height, back from the roof edge. If he slipped, he would fall only a few feet. And this method greatly facilitated camera work, which was done on a platform built on the roof where they were working. (For the long shots Lloyd used a double.)

I've never understood why Lloyd bothered to repeat the myth of greater daring. In this regard Dardis compares Lloyd to "William Faulkner, who liked to talk about his fictitious crash flights for the Royal Canadian Air Force, or Arshile Gorky, who liked to recall his days working with Kandinsky." Well, I never had a letter from Faulkner or Gorky, so I'm glad Lloyd persisted in his oddity.

He closed by hoping that we could meet sometime and talk further, but we never did. He died in 1971. I wish he could have heard the audience at the Film Forum. Plenty of people there had "never seen any of the Lloyd pictures before," and they were in stitches.

"On Film Criticism" (DGA [Directors' Guild of America] Quarterly, Winter 2006)

In 1964 I met director Carol Reed on the set of *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965) in Rome, and toward the end of our chat, he said, "I don't care if a critic knocks a film as long as one can feel that he loves films." Nudged by remembrance of a man whom every film director should regard as a colleague, I suggest that, on the seventieth anniversary of the Directors' Guild of America (DGA), we take a brief look at the course of those people who certainly knock but basically love films.

Like filmmaking itself, criticism began some thirty years before the DGA. Inevitably, the appearance of film in the mid-1890s immediately produced a flood of press coverage. Reviews percolated constantly, heated by the continuing expansion of film socially, technically, and, of course, economically. But in the first decade of film production, little that appeared in the press could really be called criticism. Gradually, thoughtful writing began to appear, even in such trade journals as *The Moving Picture World*. (The early reviews and articles are fascinating, sometimes amusing, as critics learned how to deal with this new phenomenon.) What is surprising is the relative speed with which serious writers, most particularly poets, began to take film seriously. From 1920 to 1928 Carl Sandburg was the film critic of the *Chicago Daily News*. The first American book on film aesthetics was published by Vachel Lindsay in 1915. The imagist poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) began writing film reviews in the 1920s.

Were filmmakers overjoyed by the presence of film criticism? If the theater is any guide—where I have talked to many on the subject—an absence of criticism causes a lost-in-the-Sahara feeling. Response is wanted. At least there is one strong hint about early respect for film-criticism ability. One of the first thoughtful critics was a man named Frank Woods, and D. W. Griffith was so impressed with his judgment that he hired Woods as story editor and scenarist.

All through the years before World War II, most of the criticism that appeared in large circulation media reported honestly what the writer had felt about the film—always a necessity, of course, but hardly the equivalent of critical analysis. But there were exceptions. I remember picking up a copy of *The Nation* in the mid-1930s—roughly around the time that the DGA was beginning—and reading a film review by William Troy, then a well-known literary figure. I was wonderstruck by the fact that a critic could write about film with the gravity used about any other art. Troy's reviews certainly could not have had much effect at the box office, but it is hard to believe that the makers of that picture, whatever it was, were displeased by being taken seriously.

Criticism poured along, in the daily press recording joy or dismay, in smaller magazines digging deeper. Then, in 1944, came a significant turning point—at least in the attitudes of intelligent readers. W. H. Auden praised James Agee’s film criticism in a letter to *The Nation*, saying: “[Mr. Agee’s] column is the most remarkable regular event in American journalism today.” Carol Reed would have been irked by Auden’s coolness toward film in general, but the letter contained such phrases as “extraordinary wit and felicity” and compared Agee’s criticism to “the music critiques of Berlioz and Shaw.” Everyone I knew revised his expectations of film criticism because of Auden (though I had already been touting Troy and a few others). I didn’t know any members of the DGA at the time, but I have to think that at least some of them were gratified by Auden’s letter.

This seriousness grew in the 1950s when the end of World War II brought us European pictures—Truffaut, Godard, Bergman, Antonioni, etc.—that broadened ideas of film venture and possibility. Soon there exploded in America an almost fierce enthusiasm among young people—I called them the “Film Generation”—some of whom went into film work and have been, perhaps still are, members of the DGA. (Consequently, extensive programs of film studies grew rapidly in universities. This led inevitably to academic criticism, which rarely leaves that precinct.)

Along with those European films came a critical approach that originated in France, the *auteur* theory. Also around this time, alternative weekly newspapers began in several American cities, preeminently the *Village Voice* in New York, and those new films and this new theory were particularly welcome in these papers. The *auteur* theory, reordering values in film judgment by putting the director first as dominant creator of the work, had an intoxicating effect on many of the Film Generation. If the original *auteur* fervor has somewhat subsided today, it inarguably had one lasting beneficial effect: it highlighted the elements that are possible only in film—the purely cinematic ones.

As a result of all this activity and enthusiasm, beginning in the 1960s, readers developed favorites among the different and differing critics, with support as rabid as that among sports fans for their favorites. This surely was good for the film world. Whatever one’s view of this or that choice of critics, the mere fact of the reader’s choosing was, in the long run, healthy for the critical profession, a warrant of contact and expectation.

Yet precisely to avoid such partisan bickering, I have omitted the names of those critics or of more recent ones. Two large anthologies that are tributes to the knocking-loving profession contain all the names that one could want. In 1997 came Roger Ebert’s *Book of Film: From Tolstoy to Tarantino, the Finest Writing From a Century of Film*. Arranged topically, it is mainly American writing, and it reflects Ebert’s immense knowledge of the field. In 2006 the Library of America gave its

authoritative blessing to the field by publishing *American Movie Critics: An Anthology from the Silents until Now*, which is also arranged topically and is edited by Phillip Lopate. In the first sentence of his introduction, Lopate states his purpose and belief: "This book celebrates film criticism as a branch of American letters." For this reader—immodestly because I'm included—the book fulfills the editor's claim. I cannot believe that many DGA readers, even if miffed or possibly outraged by entries here and there, will be left unmoved by the passion and the (critical) professionalism in these anthologies.

That day in 1964 I think Carol Reed felt he was being generous about critics. A cursory look at the history crowned by these recent anthologies might have tipped him toward the field. Directors are never going to feel entirely happy about criticism. How could they? Judgment by others, even if favorable, has a certain proprietary air. For a critic who has often been criticized, this is easy to understand. But I'm fairly certain that the best of what has happened in American film criticism, partially preserved in these books, will make directors feel somewhat relieved—perhaps even proud—that films elicit this level of discourse.



Re-Viewings & Reconsiderations

***A Woman of Paris*, Charles Chaplin, 1923**

(The New Republic, 22 May 1989)

To celebrate the centennial of Charlie Chaplin's birth, I re-saw *A Woman of Paris* (1923), and I regret to say that I've become a dissenter on the subject of this particular film. Its candid treatment of sexual life and its innovative techniques no longer seem so striking. Its candor (I thought at this latest viewing) had been familiar in the theater at least since 1852 with *The Lady of the Camelias*; on the screen *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* preceded it by two years into the fleshpots of Paris.

Chaplin's screenplay now looks more knobby than ever. A young Frenchwoman is about to elope to Paris. (Her hometown resembles Sunnyside, the farming village from Chaplin's 1919 film of the same name.) Through a rickety plot device she is made to think herself abandoned at the railway station; proceeds to Paris anyway; becomes a successful courtesan; and is eventually redeemed. Edna Purviance, whose star Chaplin was trying to advance, is quite uncomfortable in the role; her faithful lover is poorly cast. The one true actor is Adolphe Menjou (his first big part), who sparkles as Purviance's protector. Chaplin himself appears for only a few seconds, unbilled, as a porter.

The film's directorial nuances now seem much weaker. A few compositions use figures in two different planes. A few others employ suggestive images. In the

railway station at night a passing train is suggested by lights flowing over Purviance's body. On the whole, the picture seems not much better than other good pictures of its day.

Nonetheless, in the history of Chaplin *A Woman of Paris* is important, and the fact that it is a melodrama, undisguised, may be the most important thing about it. A highly significant and little-discussed element of Chaplin's career is that when his comic genius moved from short films to feature films in the 1920s, he used melodrama as an armature for the longer works. Short ones needed only a fertile comic situation, a string of pertinent gags, and a payoff. Longer ones needed a developed plot, and instead of farce, which one might have thought the most likely choice, Chaplin chose the oxymoronic medium of melodrama to sustain some of the funniest films ever made.

Perhaps *A Woman of Paris* had something to do with this choice. Chaplin was very much a product of the nineteenth-century theater, and he apparently used melodrama for this serious film as the form most familiar to him. Possibly it was so close, so much a part of his background, that he didn't even consciously choose it. Perhaps when he came to his next film, *The Gold Rush* (1925), which he began only a few months after he finished *A Woman of Paris*, he felt more secure with a familiar instrument in hand as he ventured into his first long comedy. (*The Gold Rush*, in its romantic aspect, has the same basic idea as *A Woman of Paris*: the redemption of a courtesan.) The journey from *The Kid* (1921), a marvelously sentimental comedy, to *The Gold Rush*, a masterly melodramatic comedy, thus progresses through the unadorned melodrama of *A Woman of Paris*.

***Diary of a Lost Girl*, G. W. Pabst, 1929** (*The New Republic*, 10 October 1983)

Georg Wilhelm Pabst (1885–1967) had the most oddly mixed career of any eminent director. Raised and educated in Vienna—like that other famous “German” director, Fritz Lang, Pabst was Austrian—he studied engineering, then art, then he became an actor and joined a German-speaking troupe that came to America. He played in the United States for four years, mostly in New York at the Irving Place Theater (the shell of which still stands); then, returning to Europe, he arrived in France just in time to be interned for the four years of World War I. He directed some plays during his internment; after the war, he detached himself from a possible theater career in Austria to enter films in Berlin.

His film direction began in 1923 *The Treasure*, a loose adaptation of the 1915 film *The Golem*, and went on through more than thirty-five works, including Garbo's first picture outside Sweden (*The Joyless Street* [1925]); an Ilya Ehrenburg

adaptation (*The Love of Jeanne Ney* [1927]); the first film to employ Freudian advisers (*Secrets of a Soul* [1926]); a pacifist film (*Westfront 1918* [1930]); a workers-solidarity film (*Kameradschaft* [1931]); a Brecht adaptation (*The Threepenny Opera* [1931]); Feodor Chaliapin's one sound film (*Don Quixote* [1933]), made in France where Pabst had gone to avoid Hitler; and a Hollywood dud with Richard Barthelmess (*A Modern Hero* [1934]). After his sidestepping of Hitler, Pabst returned to Austria in 1939—briefly, he thought, on family business, before returning to the United States and becoming a citizen. But Goebbels found the means to persuade him to remain, and he made three pictures under Hitler, two of which survive and, though period pieces, can be construed as supportive of the regime. Then, after the war, he made an anti-Nazi film about the fall of Berlin (*The Last Ten Days* [1955]) and an attack on anti-Semitism (*The Trial* [1948]).

Among the many titles omitted from this strangely variegated list are the two films he made with Louise Brooks; and retrospectively it's clear that the juncture of his anomalous career with hers is what made her own career anomalous. One of those films is famous and widely known: *Pandora's Box* (1929), derived from Frank Wedekind's two Lulu plays (*Earth Spirit* [1895]) and *Pandora's Box* [1904]). The other has been widely discussed but has been available only in 16mm form: *Diary of a Lost Girl* (also 1929). *Diary of a Lost Girl* is now having its first theatrical release in the United States on a double bill with *Pandora's Box*, which has been booked into several American cities.

Diary of a Lost Girl was made from a popular 1905 novel by Margarete Böhme (a film of it had previously been done by Richard Oswald in 1918) and was meant to be a story of the decline into sin of a bourgeois girl who is seduced: and of her triumph over sin through sin—that is, her use of prostitution to redeem and establish herself. This indeed may have been the story that Pabst filmed, but it's not complete in the version now circulating or, apparently, ever shown. Right from the beginning, censors ripped into it. Said the writer of the screenplay, Rudolf Leonhardt, "Entire filmed sequences were cut without mercy. ... The film comes to an end shortly after the middle of our script, inconclusively and incomprehensibly." I have no way to compare the present version with the first or other versions, but, as currently exhibited, the film certainly ends abruptly, has patent elisions, and clouds some motivations. (For instance, it's hard to understand why this strictly reared young girl, just having had her first communion, immediately accepts a man's invitation to his apartment.)

The substantial and mostly fascinating sequences that are left in this version are done in the *hoch* realistic style of the second half of the German 1920s, that New Objectivity which rose largely as a reaction to postwar expressionism. Some of Pabst's symbols are pat: the girl's foot accidentally kicks over a glass of red wine on a bedside table as she is about to be deflowered; feeling sad at a later point,

she gazes out through a rain-streaked window. A few set pieces are enjoyed a bit overmuch by the director (the governess of a girls' reformatory beats a gong to set the tempo of the girls' eating of their soup). But the picture breathes earnestness: it wants to press into the intertwinings of power and sex and money.

Two other sheerly cinematic factors stand out. First, this really is a silent film. People sit in pairs or groups and don't speak—they nod or frown or smile or observe—until it's time for an intertitle: then their lips move. If there *had* been a microphone in most of these scenes, the soundtrack would have long empty stretches. (In this print, the intertitles are in French—the print was made in France—with English subtitles, of course.)

Second, much of the naturalistic relish of the film had been anticipated by Erich von Stroheim in Hollywood. Stroheim doubtless had seen some German films before he made *Blind Husbands* (1919), *Foolish Wives* (1922), and *Greed* (1924); but it's a safe bet that Pabst had seen Stroheim's films before he made the two in this double bill. The seeming realism that is in fact highly manipulated—with lighting, with telling detail of clothes or furnishing, with ingested symbol—are all Stroheim hallmarks. So is the reliance on intense close-ups of unattractive faces, used to rebut the conventional cosmetics of filmmaking. In *Diary of a Lost Girl* the face of the stout madam of the girl's brothel, the face of her customer, Kurt Geron (who the following year played the manager of Marlene Dietrich's troupe in *The Blue Angel* [1930])—these and others are pure Stroheim.

But more important than any of these factors in *Diary of a Lost Girl*, and the reason for its appearance now, for the entire double bill, is Louise Brooks. Since the publication of Kenneth Tynan's interview in 1979 and especially since the publication of Brooks's own book *Lulu in Hollywood* (1982) last year, interest in her has revived strongly. Her one French film, *Prix de Beauté* (1930), was shown earlier this year: I daresay other Brooks films will follow. I haven't seen them all and can't clearly remember all that I have seen; but it seems safe to say that she owes much of her mystique to Pabst. It was Howard Hawks's *A Girl in Every Port* (1928) that brought her to Pabst's attention, but if it weren't for her two Pabst films, Brooks today would likely not be any more an icon of revived devotion than her contemporary, the gorgeous Evelyn Brent. Pabst not only gave Brooks the two best roles of her career, he dressed and photographed her brilliantly to make the most of her sullenly beautiful face, with those immense almond eyes, and of her uniquely erotic body. (It's not cream puffs like Monroe nor feline legginess like Cyd Charisse: it's lithe sturdiness, which suggests boudoir athleticism.)

Because Brooks's personal qualities completely suffuse the screen, a lot of critics have written a lot of nonsense about her acting ability. I can't remember anything she has done in a film that could be called much more than competent behaving—nothing like intensely imagined and fluently articulated acting. I flatly

disagree with Lotte Eisner, the otherwise invaluable film historian, who concludes that Brooks “is not just a ravishing creature but an amazing actress.” To restrict comparison only to beauties who *could* act, I can’t imagine Brooks doing anything remotely comparable to Garbo’s deathbed scene in *Camille* (1936). Brooks had powers that could compensate for her non-acting.

Argue, if you like, that one attribute of the film medium is that, in the right director’s hands, it can make a non-actor wonderfully effective if she has a strong erotic (or other) personality. But that is a quite different argument from the balderdash on Brooks’s acting talent. Let’s do at least two things about the matter. Let’s keep our critical discriminations as clean as we can. And let’s enjoy to the utmost—which in proof is a good deal—what Brooks gives us under the guidance of the truly talented Pabst and his colleagues.

***L’Âge d’Or*, Luis Buñuel, 1930** (*The New Republic*, 17 May 1980)

In 1928 Luis Buñuel, with Salvador Dalí, made his first film, a twenty-four-minute silent surrealist work called *Un Chien andalou*. Subsequently Buñuel was offered financing for another film by the Viscount Charles de Noailles, and in 1930 Buñuel made another surrealist film, this time with sound, called *L’Âge d’Or*. (Dalí worked on it only a few days.) The second film caused an immense scandal. In 1934 the Viscount and his wife withdrew it from circulation. Last year Allen Thiher wrote in *The Cinematic Muse* (1979, University of Missouri Press): “*Un Chien andalou* is undoubtedly the best-known work of surrealist cinema, and it will probably remain so until the family of Viscount Charles de Noailles decides that his soul will not roast in hell if *L’Âge d’Or* ... is ever released again.” Evidently the family has made this eschatological decision: *L’Âge d’Or* is now released and has just had its U.S. theatrical premiere at the Public Theater in New York.

Not many fifty-year-old scandals remain scandalous. *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913) and *Ulysses* (1922) live by something more than the uproar they created when they were born. So must *L’Âge d’Or*. I happened to see it in the 1960s at the Museum of Modern Art so I was braced for non-shock when I saw it again recently. Thiher says in his thoughtful book (consisting of critical essays on French film) that “the goal of all surrealist activity” was “to abolish the distinction between the objective and the subjective, between the repressive working of the reality principle and the pleasure principle.” The distinction has been so steadily disregarded, if not worn away, during the last fifty years that the shocking disjunctions of surrealism are now generally transformed into comedy. In *L’Âge d’Or* when the man at a formal party slaps the face of the woman who accidentally spills wine on him, it doesn’t seem much more socially anarchic than what Groucho did so often to

Margaret Dumont. An even greater tamer of the “offenses” of *L'Âge d'Or* is Buñuel himself, whose later works contain a lot of this film's elements refurbished, even amplified.

The three main assaults of the picture are on conventional love, piety, and social order. Buñuel said in 1955: “Dali and I would select gags and objects that would happen to come to mind. And we rejected without mercy everything that might mean something.” “Mean” means, of course, some meaning in objective reality. I won't try to list the episodes—which is what they are; not story—of the sixty-minute film. Here are a few samples: A mock founding of the city of Rome, on some seaside rocks, is interrupted by the sound of two lovers grappling in the mud. A grand party is interrupted by a horse-drawn cart proceeding through the drawing room. A young woman discovers a cow sitting on her bed. A gamekeeper hugs his small son, then shoots the boy for jostling a cigarette he was rolling. The two lovers grapple again in a formal garden while an orchestra nearby plays a bit of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), with a priest in the group. The man of the loving pair is summoned away; the frustrated woman sucks the toe of a statue. The conductor of the orchestra walks up the path, and the woman kisses him passionately. (Some accounts call the conductor her father.) A last episode refers to the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* (1785) with the Duke of Blangis dressed and bearded like Jesus. (The fact that Pasolini made a modernized, explicit film of the Sade novel, called *Salò* [1975], is part of the cultural difference between 1930 and now.)

Two men in the cast link the picture closely to its era. Max Ernst, the dadaist/surrealist painter, has a small part; and Gaston Modot is one of the two lovers. Modot had a long career of secondary roles in French films (he died in 1970), the best-remembered of which probably is the jealous gamekeeper in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939), but he began as a painter, was a friend of Picasso, and had his portrait painted by Modigliani in 1918.

No one who has seen “Saturday Night Live” (1975–present) or “Monty Python's Flying Circus” (1969–74) is going to be greatly upset by *L'Âge d'Or*, which is just another way of saying that those television programs are descendants of the surrealist movement in which Buñuel was active. Still is. But both in shock effect and intrinsically, I think this second film lesser than *Un Chien andalou*. One can see a daring, truly cinematic imagination in *L'Âge d'Or*, but it's crudely photographed and acted, except for Lya Lys as the other lover. Buñuel's cruelty, his scatology, his linkages of sex and religion, of sex and death, have all become so familiar since 1930, have been used so much more diabolically, that this film is less a regained masterpiece than a regained sketchbook. Just think of *The Milky Way* (1969) and, quite apart from gains in technique, you see how Buñuel made the conflict of the pleasure principle and the reality principle into a tense symbiosis rather than a mere juxtaposition.

The real shockers of 1930 these days are the films in which the reality of that period is *not* fractured, films that totally accept valentine-card love, *Saturday Evening Post* family life, hip-hoorah patriotism, and the business world as evidence of divine order. Talk about surrealism!

***M*, Fritz Lang, 1931** (*The Criterion Collection*,
6 December 2004)

It's hard to believe that *M* was made in 1931. If we allow for the fact that it's in black and white, it is more engaging to the eye, more incisive in its irony, more firm in its grasp of social complications than most of the films that come along today.

Take the very first shot. Children are playing in the courtyard of a Berlin tenement. We see them from high above; thus we hover over them. They sing, as children often do in innocent games, of chopping and killing. Our vantage point and their song prepare us for the tone of the whole film.

Fritz Lang had been directing in Berlin since 1919, and by 1931 he had made more than a dozen films. *M* was his first sound film, but no one could know that from the film itself. His use of that new instrument, the soundtrack, leaps at once past mere verisimilitude to evocation. Note the shot of the empty loft while we hear a mother call her missing child. Note—an acutely innovative device possible only with sound—that we hear the central character before we see him.

The screenplay, by Thea von Harbou, then Lang's wife, deals with a serial killer of children terrorizing Berlin. But this is not a mystery story: we know virtually from the beginning who the criminal is. We see him writing to the press, begging to be caught. The suspense is in the effect of this murderer and his murders on the structure of a large city—how two kinds of order are galvanized by the murderer's disorder.

The first order is the usual legal apparatus, government and police. All officialdom is pursuing the killer. But its very efforts evoke another group that wants the killer caught: the criminals, the non-violent criminals. Police are so thick in the streets, police raids are so frequent, that the pickpockets and safecrackers are having a hard time making a living. The murderer must be caught so that the police will quiet down and the “good” criminals can practice their professions. And to help them, to act as their spies and lookouts, the good criminals engage the guild of beggars, who throng the streets.

Lang plays these two strata of the city, upper and lower, against each other in almost musical counterpoint, and he drily makes the most of their similarities. But though it's the underworld that catches the killer, the police would have soon

caught him anyway. Lang isn't interested in a facile lampooning of the police as numbskulls; his satirical eye focuses on the kinship between the two strata.

The relation of *M* to Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928)—the analogous site in the underworld, the guild of beggars—has been much discussed. No doubt Lang and Harbou knew the Brecht work, but they had a very different view of the subject. Still, another link with Brecht exists through Peter Lorre, who plays the murderer. Lorre (who later became a big American star) had risen to prominence in Berlin through Brecht's theater work, and at the very same time that *M* was being shot, he was preparing for a Brecht play. It seems quite possible that Brecht, an exceptional director of actors, contributed privately to Lorre's basic concept of the murderer as a scurrying, furry little animal, and to the wretch's outburst when he is brought before the court of criminals.

The letter *M* with which he is tagged—for *Mörder*, German for "murderer"—guarantees that, under the wit and satire, a dark current flows. When the film first appeared in the United States in 1933, the critic William Troy wrote: "The modern psychopath, through Peter Lorre's acting, attains to the dignity of the tragic hero: the fates are now within the protagonist, instead of assailing him from without." And the ancient Greek sense of fate is heightened by the blind balloon seller. Like Teiresias in *Oedipus Rex* (430 B.C.), the blind man is the one who sees further than others, who fixes the guilt of the offender.

***La Vie est à nous*, Jean Renoir, 1936** (*The New Republic*, 1 June 1987)

A film new to America by one of the departed masters, *La Vie est à nous* (*Life Belongs to Us*)—by Jean Renoir—was just given its American theatrical premiere in Joseph Papp's Film-at-the-Public series. In 1936, at the height of the Popular Front period, the French Communist Party wanted a propaganda film, and Louis Aragon suggested that Renoir direct it. Renoir agreed, though he did not direct or write all of it. Two of his colleagues were Jean-Paul Le Chanois and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Subsequently Renoir said that he was not a Communist, which the viewer finds a bit difficult to believe—almost wants not to believe. In those days, with fascism swelling, with French democracy short-sighted and idle, the film's message could have provided at least a transient hope.

La Vie est à nous is a succession of sketches, documentary sequences, and newsreel clips carefully arranged. Some of the fiction sketches are tonally much like Nazi films of the period—disheartened people being inspired by a new faith—with the nouns changed. Other scenes include: a millionaire losing a fortune in a gambling casino and next day leveling pay cuts on the workers in his factory;

Hitler orating while on the soundtrack we hear only a dog barking; French fascists beating up a vendor of the Communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, then themselves being beaten by outraged people; a finale in which masses flow over the countryside singing the “Internationale.”

Some viewers insist that the film has true Renoir touches. They escaped me. What didn't escape me, other than the blatant propaganda and the poor photography, was the retrospective pathos. I couldn't help thinking of, for instance, the Moscow trials, which were going on at just about the time that the picture was made. I couldn't help wondering how many of the people I was looking at ended up in slave-labor camps and ovens.

“The film isn't mine, but I worked on it,” said Renoir of *La Vie est à nous* in an interview with Charles Thomas Samuels in 1972. And that about sums it up—especially the first part of Renoir's sentence.

***Casablanca*, Michael Curtiz, 1942** (*The New Republic*, 4 May 1992)

On the fiftieth anniversary of its first appearance, *Casablanca* (1942) is being reissued. Inevitably, this is an occasion for it to be swooned over by some and to be debunked by others. Like a true liberal, I have a foot in each camp.

This doubleness is underscored because seeing it again had a strange double effect. Of course I saw it when it first came out; I've also seen it a couple of times since. But in the most recent viewing, I felt as if I were seeing it for the first time while I was simultaneously remembering it. So I had, simultaneously, new and old responses.

First, some of the new ones. The outdoor settings now look really cheesy. The streets of *Casablanca* were mostly refurbished sets for *The Desert Song* (1929), we're told, and they look it. But the interiors, particularly Rick's apartment, particularly the way it is lighted by Arthur Edeson, are excellent. The deadest scenes in the story are in the flashback about the Paris romance: Humphrey Bogart simply doesn't convince as a man maddeningly in love. In this flashback he is affecting only when he's left in the lurch at the railway station, which is when he begins to take on the tone of the man we have already met, mordant in Morocco.

The “heart” sequences are troweled on: the one in which Rick arranges for a young man to win at roulette so that he'll have the money to buy exit visas for himself and his wife; the one in which an elderly German couple misuse English “charmingly.”

The subplot with Ugarte (Peter Lorre) is too stupid for a man of his supposed cleverness. Then there's Paul Henreid's performance as the anti-Nazi hero, Victor

Laszlo. When I think of Henreid, I think of his appeal in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1939); his wooden performance here is discomfiting. Henreid died just two days after I re-saw *Casablanca*, which makes this comment awkward. But it's unavoidable.

Then there are the old responses—at least the ones that still pertain. Most of the dialogue, by Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein, and Howard Koch, is just as taut and wry as it once sounded. (The very last line, Rick's to Captain Renault, was written by the producer, Hal Wallis.) The character of Rick is the firmest, most time-proof element in the picture. Ingrid Bergman is lovely, but Ilsa's character seems jigsawed to fit a niche in the plot. Rick rings true. Leo Braudy once wrote that Rick's "choices bear a remarkable resemblance to those of American heroes from Natty Bumppo on down." Something like Fenimore Cooper's Deerslayer, Rick is filled with taciturn nobility, a man living by high standards that are his own business. He says, "I stick my neck out for nobody," but we know otherwise. We like both his denial of heroism and our private knowledge of the truth.

This leads to the reason, in my view, for the picture's perennial popularity. Our times are wary of the romantic. We sometimes enjoy it (*Pretty Woman* [1990] is a recent example), but when we do, we know we're slumming. *Casablanca* gives us a rare chance to enjoy romance without slumming. Rick is so hard-boiled that any touch of lavender is wiped away. His undeludedness licenses us to empathize with his love. In a nitty-gritty time, *Casablanca* is a permissible romance.

One more reward, not unique to *Casablanca* but certainly part of its pleasure—a peculiar familiarity. As I watched the actors take their places in the story (quite apart from the two stars)—Claude Rains, Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet, Marcel Dalio, S. Z. Sakall, John Qualen, Leonid Kinskey, Curt Bois, and others—I felt a sense of community. I knew those men. They used to visit me every four or five months, in films called by one name or another, but the titles didn't matter—I knew them.

My mother once told me that, when she was a girl around the turn of the century, she felt that the members of the 125th Street Stock Company were almost like members of the family. Well, that theater on 125th Street eventually got expanded to cover the entire globe, but in the high Hollywood days, when a studio had companies of players under contract to appear in its plentiful films, the feeling was much the same.

***The Lady without Camelias*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1953** (*The New Republic*, 4 April 1981)

Recently I went to see *Attila* (1846), an early opera by one of my heroes in art, Giuseppe Verdi. I thought *Attila* very weak, with little hint in it of the Verdi to

come, which was surprising because even earlier Verdi, *Nabucco* (1841) and *Ernani* (1844), seem stronger and more prophetic of the giant en route.

Recently I went to see *The Lady without Camelias*, an early film by Michelangelo Antonioni. I thought *The Lady* very weak, with little hint in it of the Antonioni to come, which was surprising because even earlier Antonioni, *Story of a Love Affair*, seemed stronger and more prophetic of the giant en route.

I had seen *The Lady without Camelias* once before, at the 1965 New York Film Festival, and thought it feeble. (It's Antonioni's third film, made in 1953; *Story of a Love Affair* was made in 1950; then, in 1952, he made a three-episode film, *I Vinti*, which I've never seen.) *The Lady* has just now been given its American theatrical premiere by Film-at-the-Public, a branch of the Papp complex. And now it looks feebler than it did in 1965, not because of Antonioni's masterpieces, which are some of the paramount artworks of our age, but because I've since seen the first film. *The Lady* has a trite script: about a salesgirl who becomes a film star, gets notions of grandeur, makes an ambitious flop, then sinks back into sleazy pictures. Connected with this action are the stories of a marriage that she ruins and a lover who deserts her.

The script is flat as tinware, the acting bearably routine except for the star Lucia Bosè, who is unbearably routine. It's said that Antonioni wanted Gina Lollobrigida or Sophia Loren for the role, either of whom would at least have given the picture some personal sparkle, which now it has not. I don't understand the title: the heroine is not a modern courtesan, simply a lucky non-entity who takes some time to realize the extent of her luck. The big disappointment is the visual barrenness of the picture; Antonioni himself said that the camerawork was "more orthodox" than in his first film.

One moment only is out of the ordinary: the first shot. From above we see Bosè walking idly back and forth on the curb of a street at night. She does this under the credits; with the last credit, she suddenly turns and goes into the film theater in front of which she has been waiting, goes in to see the last minute of the film in which she is starring ... an angle and an action that interest us, that lead to a point, and that launch the story. But it's not much of a story.

***Seven Samurai*, Akira Kurosawa, 1954**

(*The New Republic*, 31 January 1983)

Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, made in 1954, is now being shown in the United States for the first time in its original version. This version—let's call it A—runs 208 minutes and was shown in only a few big Japanese cities. Version B, somewhat shortened, played second and third runs in Japan. Version C, which runs

160 minutes, is the one that has previously been shown in the U.S. as the “full” film, in contrast with Version D, 141 minutes, which is the one available in 16mm. I have now seen all versions except B. I’ve used D in film courses without feeling like a butcher, although I prefer the longer C. My trouble is, now that I’ve seen A, I still prefer C.

Not many would dispute that, wherever one locates it in these varying versions, *Seven Samurai* is a masterpiece. I was one of the 125 or so critics around the world recently invited by *Sight and Sound*, the British film journal, to submit a list of ten favorite films, a poll that the journal has been conducting every ten years from 1952 on. *Seven Samurai* was on my list, and it placed third in the cumulative tally. At least this demonstrates that, nearly thirty years after it was made, the film stands high in the world—in fact is growing in reputation: it was not on the Top Ten lists for 1962 and 1972. I don’t know how many times I have seen it, in one version or another, but it has always gripped me.

That is, until I saw Version A, Kurosawa’s own version. (Apparently he had insufficient control over what was done to it later.) With this fullest version, the element of time entered into my consciousness as it had never done before, the time needed to build, articulate, and conclude the complex novelistic story. (And the intermission, which is necessary, doesn’t help.) the passage of time became a kind of counterpoint to the film itself after the first twenty minutes or so. In the past, the film had simply existed in the time it needed, as a good status or building exists in the space it needs. I can’t specify all the “new” materials—even the published screenplay is not complete—but I was most aware of extension in the prologue during which the samurai are enlisted and the sequences involving the young samurai and the disguised village girl. The wonderfully edited battle scenes also had moments that I couldn’t remember having seen in other versions. It was my first viewing of *Seven Samurai* in which I felt that a foreign sensibility and foreign cultural-dramatic expectations were distancing it slightly.

This raises the unanswerable question: What is the authentic “text” of a film? It’s a question that critics and teachers have to face—or, if possible, have to avoid. I can’t begin to list all the films of which incomplete or lacerated copies are the only ones in existence; and color has only increased the problem because it deteriorates. I’d bet that 25% of the “revivals” shown in film theaters are not exact copies of the original release prints; for 16mm prints, the figure could be 50%. This situation, about which I’ve often complained, is horrible. But does it automatically follow that the uncut version or the director’s restoration of a “pre-original” version is best? Would anyone really prefer the original ten-hour version of Erich von Stroheim’s *Greed* (1924)? I don’t question that anyone would like the chance to see it once. I’m grateful for the chance to have seen Version A of *Seven Samurai*, but must I prefer

it? To come considerably down the scale, must I prefer Steven Spielberg's second, revised, and amplified version of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)?

The problem exists in other fields, as well. How many audiences have ever seen Voltimand and Cornelius in a production of *Hamlet* (1603)? How many audiences have missed them? The Cambridge classicist M. I. Finley recently said: "When we read Thucydides or Lucretius or Tacitus, either in the original or in translation, it is an act of faith to believe that throughout we are reading precisely what Thucydides or Lucretius or Tacitus wrote." I see no way to handle the question except to face each instance as it comes, as in the case of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*: with the weight evenly distributed on both feet, with empiricism at the ready.

***Bob le Flambeur*, Jean-Pierre Melville, 1956**

(*The New Republic*, 9 August 1982)

In 1971 an interviewer asked the French director Jean-Pierre Melville whether he would like to see his *Bob le Flambeur* (1956) reissued. Melville said: "No ... I don't see the point. ... If I ever find my real script for *Bob le Flambeur* I shall remake it." Melville died in 1973.

I don't imply treachery. Directors, at least as much as most people, speak grandiloquently in interviews. I'm glad that *Bob le Flambeur* is now being shown again, but more because it draws attention to Melville than because of the film itself. His remark shows at least some dissatisfaction with the picture, and on the basis of my knowledge of Melville, which is enforcedly small, I can see why. *Bob le Flambeur* is one of his several attempts to do a Parisian version of an American crime film, relying on atmospherics and on characterizations that are more poster-like than profound. It shows clearly that Melville's chief interest in crime was as a vehicle for style, but it's precisely on stylistic ground that *Bob le Flambeur* wavers. This film nevertheless also shows why, along with Melville's three previous features, he had a notable influence on the New Wave that was then a-borning.

His real patronymic was Grumbach; he was a Parisian Jew of Alsatian origin. He changed the name to Melville, he said, out of admiration for the author, who was only one of his many American admirations. Melville—J.-P.—became one of those figures, familiar in every art, who are not well-known to the public but who function as minor deities to at least some of their fellow artists, especially in their own countries. Born in 1917 and mad about films even as a small child, he began work after World War II, working on that proverbial, ever-available shoe-string, doing his own producing and writing and art direction. His second film, in 1947, was made from Cocteau's 1929 novel *Les Enfants terribles* at Cocteau's

own suggestion after he saw Melville's first film, which says something—if something still needs to be said—about Cocteau's perception. (Melville thought there was a second reason: Cocteau wanted to launch his “new discovery,” Edouard Dhermitte.)

Melville acted, too: he played a leading role in his third film, *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* (1959), and sometimes played in other people's films. For instance, he's the novelist who is interviewed in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*. (Which 1960 picture also contains a reference to *Bob le Flambeur*. At one point Michel asks whether he can borrow money from Bob Montagné—the full name of Melville's protagonist—and is told that Bob is in jail.) Melville was too old to be an “official” member of the New Wave, but they admired him because, among other reasons, he was one of the first Frenchmen to respond to the sheerly cinematic qualities of the best American popular film and because he had a passion for the realities of Paris life and atmosphere. The best aspect of *Bob le Flambeur* is its capture of Montmartre streets and cafés.

Still, the film disappoints. Partly this is because Bob the Gambler is thinly played; it needed a French William Powell, and Roger Duchesne doesn't nearly fill the bill. Partly it's because, after the excellent opening shot of Paris, the look of the film becomes commonplace. Henri Decaë, who collaborated often with Melville, did better photography for him elsewhere. The *use* of the camera is always deft; the look of the frame is often commonplace. And partly it's because the script degenerates from genre exaltation to genre exploitation, from (say) Dashiell Hammett to Damon Runyon. It ends as one more “perfect crime” story with a trick finish. It's noteworthy that the dialogue—for Melville's original story—was written by Auguste Le Breton, who wrote the novel on which Jules Dassin's *Rififi* (1955) was based, one of the memorable “perfect crime” films.

In 1967 Melville made a film called *Le Samouraï* with Alain Delon as a professional killer. It wasn't brought to the United States until after the success of *The Godfather* (1972); Melville's film was then ridiculously retitled *The Godson*, which greased its exit. *Le Samouraï*, photographed in color by that same Henri Decaë, was like an icy ballet, the stylistic success in a crime film that *Bob le Flambeur* doesn't achieve. But I'm glad that Melville's interview statement, quoted above, was disregarded, I'm glad to have seen *Bob le Flambeur*, and I hope that other Melville films (especially the nine of them not yet released in the U.S.) will come along soon.

Critical Coincidence. In an article on Orson Welles and Gregg Toland (*Critical Inquiry*, Summer 1982), Robert L. Carringer “reveals” that the famous opening shot of the attempted suicide sequence in *Citizen Kane* (1941) was not pure deep-focus but was a matte shot, “an in-camera effect that has never been recognized as one.” In Rui Nogueira's little book *Melville* (Viking, 1972), Melville says

that everyone in Paris in the late 1940s “was wondering how Orson Welles had done certain shots in *Citizen Kane*,” which had not been released there until after the war. Especially discussed was that shot on which Carringer now comments. Says Melville: “Of course Welles never explained how Toland had done it ... but after seeing the film innumerable times, I came to the conclusion that he shot this sequence as a composite.” Melville thereupon attempted the same sort of shot with Decaë in his first feature, *La Silence de la mer* (1947).

***Lawrence of Arabia*, David Lean, 1962**

(*The New Republic*, 6 October 1997)

David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) has just been re-released by Columbia in a new print, and I went to see the film again. Admittedly, it doesn't take a lot to get me to *Lawrence* again on a big screen, but the re-release left me craving this work's sheer voluptuousness.

Lawrence of Arabia is even more clearly what it was than when I saw it last, in 1989. Every fine element in it shines more brilliantly—the acting, the dialogue, the editing, the cinematography—and the film's flaws are thus even more regrettable. Maurice Jarre's score relies much too confidently on the one familiar theme, broad and much more *Opéra comique* than Arabic. The structure of Part Two, after the capture of Aqaba, is a series of adventures instead of a cumulative line. Images get repeated (desert attacks, train explosions), Lawrence's declarations of his ordinariness and its opposite slip from complexity into muddle.

We're left at the end with the feeling that Part Two of this 222-minute film, despite occasional inventive bursts, is the price that Lean and his colleagues had to pay in order to make Part One. That first part is crammed with excitements of every kind (in my fourth viewing), adventures in color and composition, in the unfurling of vastness—a plunge into primal simplicities at the start of the onrushing twentieth century. But the story had in some measure or manner to be finished off, so we journey through Part Two in the same gifted hands but with less sense of artistic adventure.

Still, what rewards. I know of no film, excepting some of John Ford's Westerns, that so successfully integrates its physicality with its drama. And I saw once again why *Lawrence of Arabia* seems more spacious than all the dozens of cleverly made epics in outer space. There is no space in outer space—for human beings. People in space are like submarine crews. The ocean is immense, but they are prisoners; the immensity of the sea is not a direct part of their experience. So, like astronauts, they float or slide past one another in their tubes. Not so in *Lawrence*. *Lawrence* luxuriates in the tremendous.

And some of the appeal of *Lawrence of Arabia* is the exploit of making it. Those space epics are for the most part done in labs and studios. The story of the making of *Lawrence* in Jordan and Morocco and Spain is implicit in the film itself. (For fascinating details, see Kevin Brownlow's *David Lean*, published in 1996.) Obviously, physical and logistical difficulties don't guarantee a film's quality. Countless bloated and vapid pictures have been made under such difficulties; but they only seem a waste of time and money. With *Lawrence* we get the sensation—fanciful, but what of that?—that what we are seeing on screen is the success of a long struggle. Even at the close of the serpentine Part Two, we seem to share a sense of triumph with the film's makers.

Last summer at the Lincoln Center Festival in New York I saw a Romanian production of Aeschylus's *The Suppliants* (470 B.C.) that, most of the time, had more than 100 actors on stage. I wasn't much moved by the production, as it happens, but I lolled in its size. I kept relishing the scope of the enterprise, thinking that we're not going to get many chances in our theater, foreseeably, to see such lavishness, not even in musicals. (Which, again obviously, is not to say that small casts equal thinness. Not with Pinter and Mamet at hand.) It was something of the same hunger, in another art, that took me again to *Lawrence of Arabia*. Remarkable that this sort of hunger now has a touch of nostalgia about it.



Obituaries & Remembrances

“Jean Renoir, 1894–1979” (*The New Republic*, 10 March 1979)

“To become immortal, then to die.” This is the ambition of the novelist in Godard’s *Breathless* (1960), which I happened show in a film class on the day that the news came of Jean Renoir’s death. It may not have been Renoir’s conscious ambition, but he achieved it.

That’s what makes an obituary comment on him seem odd—not the stale joke about “I thought he was dead” but that he has already been well and truly canonized. The actual fact of his death has been anticipated by some with a special dread. As much as five years ago, David Thomson, a warm admirer, wrote in his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*: “Renoir will die shortly, thus releasing the grossest sentimental tributes.” Tribute must be risked nonetheless. To let the death of such a man go unmarked would be, for one offense, to slight ourselves.

First, the length of his life—of *his* life, not just anyone who happens to survive for eighty-four years—gives him a unique place. He connected *La Belle Époque*, from his father the painter, to the present day. He was an exponent of a view of art that doesn’t promise to be generated again: art as community, from which one can make every bitter expedition into blackness—as Renoir certainly did—but which supports the expedition, strengthens its unsentimental insistence.

Second, his long career encompasses a history of change in film style. He went into films, he said, because he hated the theater. He also hated the French films of the time, the early 1920s, and was galvanized by the American films he saw. As time went on, he saw no point in not recognizing his Frenchness or, aesthetically speaking, in skirting the theatrical. Whether recognized as such or not, his most celebrated stylistic hallmark was the ingestion into cinema syntax of theatrical “place,” composition, and—as possible—duration. The basis of this style is the deep-focus shot and the “sequence shot”—i.e., the shot that contains a sequence. Renoir didn’t invent the idea—you can see it in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)—but he used it as a principle, a reaction against the principle of montage that had been dominant since Griffith.

Indeed, it was Renoir’s concern with the actor, his ability to direct actors, without slighting his purely pictorial gifts, that led to the development in his style that made him so influential: precisely the principle of depth-of-field shooting and the continuing shot, as distinct from the principle of montage, of assembled shots, that had been so influential since Eisenstein and the latter’s American master, Griffith. The origin of Renoir’s method was an interest in the *actor*: to avoid fragmentation, and by means of longer-playing shots to give the actor a chance to develop his own rhythm in the speaking of his lines. He followed actors with his camera, or/and he let them move in and out of shots at differing planes, instead of snapping shorter fragments of their work in front of us that affect us with combinations rather than single units.

To many, the idea of composition in depth was a philosophical view. André Bazin, who *mutatis mutandis* was Aristotle to Renoir’s Sophocles, said it was “a cinematic style which was capable of expressing everything without fragmenting the world, of revealing the hidden meaning of human beings and their environment without destroying their natural unity.” My own view is that Renoir was at least partially motivated by confidence, in himself and in film. He felt that the (still-young) film medium no longer needed to prove its selfhood by relying so heavily on a technique that no other art could employ: the film could now be sure enough of itself to translate into its own language the lexicon of the theater. Put another way, Renoir’s use of deep focus and the continuing shot was fundamentally an attempt to fuse the aesthetics of the stage—the fixity of frame—with the cinema’s urge to keep adding frames and discrete images. He wanted to restore the theater to film without injuring the intrinsic quality of film itself. In fact, Renoir went on to include literal theatrical imagery in his films, from *La Chienne* (1931) to his last film, which was in fact titled *Le Petit Théâtre de Jean Renoir* (1969). (And in the 1950s he directed three plays: *Julius Caesar* [1959], a comedy of his own, and Odets’s *The Big Knife* [1949].)

Third, for several reasons but mainly because of his style, Renoir had an enormous influence on other filmmakers. He is one of the five most influential directors in film history. (The others are Griffith, Eisenstein, Ford, and Godard.) Out of the endless instances that could be cited, here is one—again from Godard's *Breathless*. In one sequence Jean-Paul Belmondo is in a taxi with Jean Seberg. He gets out and walks up the street away from us to speak to someone. The camera waits in the cab with Seberg, watching. When Belmondo has finished, he returns. The camera hasn't moved, the sequence has been contained in one shot. The deep-focus shot has changed the "shape" of the screen for a few moments—visual variety is not nothing—and, through composition, the shot itself has implicated Seberg, in the foreground, with Belmondo's activities in the background.

Lastly, of course, Renoir's films themselves, I'm not the best threnodist here because I have reservations about many of them. (I've seen most, though not all, of the thirty-two features and eleven shorts, many of them more than once.) At what I consider his height—*La Grande illusion* (1937), which "in" acolytes rank lower apparently because it's widely admired, and *The Rules of the Game* (1939), in which Renoir himself plays a leading role—he has added first-magnitude stars to the cinema sky. Many other of his films have beauties that only he could have given them: for instances, *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* (1936), *The River* (1951), *The Elusive Corporal* (1962). But he was capable of muddling drama: I don't like his *Lower Depths* (1936) nearly as much as Kurosawa's version. And he was vulnerable to attacks of facile French camaraderie, all the way from *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932) to *Le Petit Théâtre*. Recently, for instance, I tried for the third time to sit through *The Golden Coach* (1953) but couldn't make it. Its archness, its heavy interplay of theater and life, drove me out. But even when one doesn't like a Renoir film, one doesn't want to make too much of the fact because the man, the career, and the career's highlights are so admirable.

The sum of his work thus outlines a mighty presence. Despite his recurrent easy sentiment and—paradoxically—to some degree because he probed depravity and cruelty, he was the prime exponent on film of unanimism, the poetic movement in early twentieth-century France that reacted against art for art's sake and sought its sources in the lived life around it, yet without returning to pseudo-scientific naturalism and without overt "social significance." Renoir's best work is the large embrace of a loving man who sees clearly what it is that he is loving.

Inarguably, a giant is gone—now really gone, after a decade of unhappy lingering. Gone; and with the sole exception of the very different Bergman, there is no career in process that looks to have anything like equivalent size.

"Fredric March, 1897–1975" (*The New Republic*, 10 May 1975)

A few months ago I was on a panel of judges who were to give an award to an American for lifelong achievement in film. We finally voted the award to a director with a long and significant career, which was fine, but my own first choice was Fredric March. My nomination was voted down because, my colleagues felt, March had had no demonstrable influence (one of the requirements). I voted for the director with pleasure, but I pointed out that, on their ground for disqualifying March, probably no actor would ever get the award.

The fact that March died on April 14th doesn't make the panel's decision any righter or wronger, of course, but it did make me think about the matter of actors' influence. I re-read one of the most touching tributes to an actor that I know, Bernard Shaw's memoir of Barry Sullivan (1821–91), a famous Shakespearean in his day (in *Shaw on Theatre*, edited by E. J. West, published by Hill and Wang in 1958). Shaw published the piece in 1948, when he was ninety-two, recalling the effect that Sullivan had made on him some eighty years before: "The important truth is that the idols of adolescents, and to some extent of adults, are often founded on their admiration of great actors. It was certainly so in my own case ... when I was a very impressionable boy he became my model of personal nobility."

Probably March was not a great actor, in serious view, simply because he didn't play enough great roles. But his James Tyrone on Broadway in O'Neill's masterpiece, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941), showed the greatness that was in him; and the range and truth and power of his film work—*A Star Is Born* (1937), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Nothing Sacred* (1937), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), on and on and on, concluding with his magnificent Harry Hope in *The Iceman Cometh* (1973)—were like a presence of integrity in a field not especially noted for it. I can't blame March for the state of my "personal nobility," but from the time I first saw him forty-five years ago, the quality of his work has been part of my education, therefore an influence.

I wish he had got that award—for my sake, not because he needed it. Anyway, goodbye to him now, from millions.

"Douglas Sirk, 1897–1987" (*The New Republic*, 16 February 1987)

Detlef Sierck, who died in January, had an extraordinary career. Born in Hamburg in 1900, he began work as a dramaturg at a Hamburg theater in 1920. Soon he became a director at various German theaters, where he did Molière, Shakespeare,

Büchner, Strindberg, Ibsen, Wedekind, and Shaw. He entered films in 1934 and directed a drastically altered version of Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* (1877), along with melodramas tinged by subservience to the Nazis. But he broke loose and arrived in Hollywood in 1940. After various misadventures, he established himself as a director there, and from 1942 to 1958 he made some twenty-eight films. In 1960 he returned to Germany—to the theater: he said that “the German cinema was wrecked.” He picked up the theater threads he had dropped some thirty years earlier and did productions of Rostand, Ionesco, Shakespeare, Schiller, Tennessee Williams, and more.

In that long Hollywood “interlude” he changed his name to Douglas Sirk and made his reputation. Of course it's easier to make a lasting reputation with films than with theater productions, but Sirk's films were largely made from trashy fiction—such as *Written on the Wind* (1956), *Imitation of Life* (1959), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956), *Magnificent Obsession* (1954).

And it is precisely through his handling of such trash that he became a director of high repute and great influence. Godard, Bertolucci, and Fassbinder are only three of the younger directors who venerated him for his visual style and general cinematic sensibility. When I read the obituary, I couldn't help thinking again about a director's advantage over an actor, especially with inferior material: a director can transmute the whole of a lesser script, not just one role, can raise the level of the entire work. So well did Sirk accomplish these transmutations that in Justin Wintle's *Makers of Modern Culture* (1981), a discerning biographical dictionary, he gets two columns—right after Georg Simmel—and in the opening sentence is called a genius. I'm not here disputing the justness of the term: I'm merely underscoring the oddity, considering the material Sirk had at his disposal.

There's another oddity. After his return to Germany, Sirk dropped his *nom de cinéma* and became Sierck again in the theater. Is the change back to his own name an insight into what he really thought of his Hollywood career? If so, the reversion is doubly wry, because it's as Sirk that he will be remembered.

“Cesare Zavattini, 1902–1989” (*The New Republic*, 27 November 1989)

Last month a man died in Rome at eighty-seven who had affected the film experience of millions around the world and yet was known to few of them. Cesare Zavattini was one of those rare and important figures—screenwriters who have had a huge influence on the careers of certain directors, even on certain periods. Zavattini, along with Suso Cecchi D'Amico, is one of the two outstanding writers of postwar Italian film. He wrote screenplays for many directors, including Blasetti

and Visconti, but his signal work was done for Vittorio De Sica. Chief among these films are *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), *Miracle in Milan* (1951), *Two Women* (1961), and *A Brief Vacation* (1973). Not all of Zavattini's screenplays were originals, but then neither were Boito's librettos.

He was a short, stocky, energetic man with a bald head and an undershot jaw, full of film talk and radical politics. Twenty-five years ago I visited him in his Rome apartment, and despite my strangulated Italian (he knew no English), it was an exhilarating morning.

So far as I could judge, he served De Sica in something of the same way that Edmund Wilson had served Scott Fitzgerald, as socio-political conscience. The day before we met, I had been in a sound studio where De Sica was supervising the music recording for *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (1963), to which Zavattini had contributed but which had no wisp of the usual CZ social touch. Diffidently I mentioned this. He agreed vigorously, then pointed to the pile of five or six manuscripts on a corner of his huge desk. Those, he said, were the socially concerned films that he and De Sica could not get financed. So ...

On the walls of his apartment were dozens of framed tiny paintings, some no larger than a postcard. (You can see a selection of them on the jacket of his autobiography, *Scenes from a Cinematic Life*, published by Prentice-Hall in 1970.) I asked about them, and he said that when he first came to Rome, he went to an art gallery and was struck by a certain painter's work, but couldn't afford to buy anything. He wrote to the painter, told him how much money he could spend, and asked what he could get for it. The painter sent him a postcard-size painting, executed for him. Since then, as time and fortune advanced, Zavattini had written to all the painters he admired, including some big names, and had commissioned postcard-size paintings. Hence this collection.

A unique, nubblly, wry character. I presume to hope that these comments will serve as a small note of thanks from all of us who are indebted to him.

"Federico Fellini, 1920–1993" (*The New Republic*, 31 January 1994)

Federico Fellini died in Rome on October 31, 1993. Three days later, Alan Cowell wrote in *The New York Times*, with appropriate tremolo:

In the studio where he made his movies and his name, Fellini lay in cinematographic state today, the lights soft, the music no more than a whisper, the tenderness of the thousands who filed by his burnished coffin mingling with the ghosts of his creations.

His funeral service was held in a Roman basilica, and, reported *The Times*, the huge crowd flowed into the piazza outside. Millions watched the ceremony in a live television broadcast. When the coffin was brought in, “applause filled the basilica.”

The coffin was then taken back to his hometown of Rimini. *Variety* reported that, through narrow streets packed with thousands, the coffin was carried from the main piazza to a memorial service, which was held in the theater where Fellini saw his first films and which was featured in *Amarcord* (1973). “Those marching in the procession applauded without interruption as other people threw roses from balconies.” An Italian journalist told me that the Rimini theater is to be converted into a Fellini museum, full of memorabilia, where his films will always be available.

To say that all these events are like scenes in a Fellini film is obvious but incomplete. What they really show is how well Fellini understood his countrymen. Loved though he was universally, the rest of the world little knew how immensely he was adored at home. When he was given a lifetime achievement award at the Oscar ceremonies in March 1993, after having won four Oscars in previous years, the Italian newspaper *L'Unita*, the Communist organ, ran a 160-page special supplement about him. This for a director whose works are virtually free of political comment.

Last year the Italian government made a move of recognition. A complete Fellini retrospective was organized by the Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo (with subvention from a coffee company), which was shown in Rome, Milan, and Turin. It was playing at the Film Forum in New York when he died, and it has now moved to Tokyo.

Included in the list was his last film, made in 1990 and never released in the United States, *Voices of the Moon*. (The Italian title translates in the singular: *The Voice of the Moon*.) Fellini said: “The initial idea came to me after reading Ermanno Cavazzoni’s 1987 novel *Il Poema dei Lunatici*, which is about mad people in Italy.” He didn’t adapt the novel: it simply stimulated him, particularly since, some thirty years earlier, he had spent five or six weeks with the director of a mental hospital in Tuscany, who lived on the premises.

Voices of the Moon is not in any sense a clinical study. It’s a poetical rhapsody, much more indebted to Giacomo Leopardi (who is quoted) than to Sigmund Freud. The central character, played by Roberto Benigni, is a man in a small town, lately a patient in a mental hospital, who wanders gently through that town, often at night by the light of the moon, and who thinks he hears voices from a well. But principal among his adventures are his encounters with the noise and mess of modern life—the intrusions of the media, a tawdry beauty contest—and his madness chiefly manifests itself in his quest for purity and order. (In 8½ [1963]

the vision in white, played by Claudia Cardinale, tells the protagonist that she has come into his life to bring purity and order.)

He never quite understands the voices from the well. At the end the moon speaks to him, with the voice of a woman in his town whom he has worshipped from afar. She bids him to stop trying to understand those voices, to be grateful that at least he can hear them. In the middle of her remarks, she begs to be excused—a break for a commercial, she says.

Benigni is known in the U.S. through two films with Jim Jarmusch (*Down by Law*, 1986; *Night on Earth*, 1991) and the last Pink Panther picture (*Son of the Pink Panther*, 1993). He is joined in this film, much of the time, by Paolo Villagio, who plays an ex-mayor of the town, gone bonkers with paranoia. Driven loony by the pressures of the world, he now suspects that the most innocent people and objects are conspiring against him.

Villagio is not known here, but both he and Benigni are, said Fellini,

two enormously popular and much-loved stars [in Italy] who have built up an intense relationship of complicity with their audiences. I broke up that complicity completely, smashed their images, destroyed the characters that had made them famous. They deserve my eternal gratitude for accepting that sacrifice. Without them ... the film would never have seen the light of day.

This alteration of image can't be seen by non-Italian viewers, even with Benigni, but the experience and dexterity of the two men are patent. Benigni's soft floating and Villagio's dark, overdone ire give a course, a base, to these pathetic meanderings in the moonlight.

Unique though it is in theme, *Voices of the Moon* is nonetheless typical of Fellini—in its heterodoxy. He said, "I was totally in the dark while making the film ... I spent each evening writing the next day's scenes on a scrap of paper." If that sounds like ex post facto bravado, which it may be, it suggests the opposite of firm structure: it's investigation—of milieu, mood, character. Think of the other films he made in this (ostensibly) freehand manner: *Amarcord*, *The Clowns* (1970), *Roma* (1972), *Intervista* (1987). True, some of his clearly structured films, *La Dolce Vita* (1960), and *8½*, share that freehand style to a degree as Fellini fulfills their designs; but here the style is almost the *raison d'être*. The odd aspect of these style-centered films is that, in full career perspective, they seem inventions mothered by necessity.

That necessity grows out of the binary nature of Fellini's career. As with many artists, his work falls into periods—in his case, two. Fellini rose to prominence as a screenwriter in the neorealist days right after World War II. His first important work was collaboration on the screenplays of Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) and *Paisan* (1946). Pure neorealism. But when Fellini began to direct (*Variety*

Lights, 1950), the neorealism was touched with a lyric quality, something other than the revelation of fact. Still, all the work he did through *The Nights of Cabiria* (1957) was concerned with the underprivileged, if not the downright poor, and was made in the neorealist mode pioneered by Rossellini, Visconti, and De Sica. We can catch glimpses of the subsequent Fellini in *La Strada* (1954) and *Cabiria*; but Fellini was intent on neorealism. His masterpiece of the period, *I Vitelloni* (1953), is unswervingly neorealist.

These earlier films are the ones that have by far the closest relation in Fellini to the Second World War—in style, not in subject. Neorealism was a stylistic response to the war, and his early films are his response to that response. A biographical fact, as well as an aesthetic atmosphere, may be involved. Fellini was not caught up in the war. Born in 1920, he was of age for military service, but, with some ingenuity, he found medical reasons to avoid the draft—whether because he was anti-fascist or non-fascist, as has been conjectured, or simply out of self-preservation. We can't say or judge. But we can hazard that his first group of films, largely concerned with people struggling to survive, was a kind of indirect acknowledgment of the sufferings brought on by the war; and may have been seen by him as a sort of expiation.

Yet it was only when he left neorealism and turned to quite different social strata, with *La Dolce Vita*, that we see the emergence of the Fellini whom the world knows best, the baroque, theatrical, gallant stylist. With *La Dolce Vita*, Fellini turned from hardscrabbling lives to the lives in upper strata that occupy most of the succeeding films. Cyril Connolly said somewhere that one dividend of success for a writer is that it enables him to move into different, enlarged social circles, which may benefit his work. So it seems to have been with Fellini. When, consciously or not, he needed new circles to explore, his success with films about poor people gave him access to those circles. Maturity and self-confidence had much to do with the change, of course, but so did his upward social mobility. Success had come to him; and with success had come that perk so important to serious artists who succeed—the chance to see that success is hollow.

Related to this change in Fellini's life and art is a major event: his discovery of Jung. Some years later, Fellini wrote of this discovery:

It was like the sight of unknown landscapes, like the discovery of a new way of looking at life; a chance of making use of its experiences in a braver and bigger way, of recovering all kinds of energies, all kinds of things, buried under the rubble of fears, lack of awareness, neglected wounds. What I admire most ardently in Jung is the fact that he found a meeting place between science and magic, between reason and fantasy.

Only Jung could determine, possibly, whether Jung helped Fellini to focus on new landscapes for his films or whether the new landscapes opened him to Jung. In any

case the conjunction impelled Fellini to concentrate still more intensely on making the invisible visible; to expand his cinematic style from the lyrical neorealist to the dreamily florid; and to do these things with characters who had, one might say, more leisure for inner turmoil. Fellini's horizon of humane sympathy did not shrink, but he discovered that Hamlet has to be a prince in order to have time for soliloquies.

A salient aspect of his second-period films is that, unlike his earlier pictures, many of them have no programmatic narrative or drama. The two outstanding exceptions are *La Dolce Vita* and *8½*; and even with the second of these, Fellini himself has testified to his troubles in finding a program. He said, in an interview in *Le Monde* in 1990, that he had written a letter of resignation to the producer because he was blank, when all of a sudden he was summoned to a launch party for the picture. "They all raised their cups and drank to my health. 'Dottore, this film is going to be a great one. Cheers!' I almost died of shame." He went back to his office, tore up his letter of resignation, "then filmed the story of a director who can't remember what film he's supposed to be making."

The result was the masterpiece of the second period and, most certainly, one of the best films in world history: a comedy-drama of middle-age crisis in the creative life of a film director that has become one of the most widely loved and admired works in post-World War II cinema. Fellini's film remains the film world's furthest exploration of a mode opened in the twentieth century by Pirandello: performance as truth. I tackled this aspect in a reconsideration of the film I wrote in 1976, and cited the Father's line to the Theater Manager in *Six Characters in Search an Author* (1921): "That which is a game of art for you is our sole reality." (A further hint that Pirandello was on Fellini's mind is the name of the producer in *8½*—Pace—which is the same as that of the milliner in *Six Characters*. The milliner runs a shop where assignations take place, and this may be Fellini's wry view of a producer's function.) *8½* uses four types of consciousness—present awareness, memory, dream, and daydream—to dramatize, often comically, the desperation of a drained artist who survives by using his talent itself, and the life behind it, as his subject. The game of art becomes the sole reality.

But *8½*, alas, is the last Fellini film of notable cogency. Most of the rest, scintillating and endearing and invaluable as they often are, are either (seeming) improvisations or adaptations, like *Satyricon* (1969) and *Casanova* (1976). These two, though they teem with Fellini images, rank low on the Fellini scale. Some of the others, ad hoc though they may appear, are major achievements—*Amarcord*, *The Clowns*, *Intervista*.

Why did Fellini make these free-form films? Here is a speculation. He had cut loose from the people among whom he grew up, had moved from the imperatives of sheer survival to the luxury of melancholy and despair. After his first two films

in this contemplative vein he had great difficulty—like Guido in *8½*—in synthesizing narrative out of his new social and spiritual environment. Yet he was brimming with talents that he had to use. A post-Guido Guido, he more or less gave up on constructing conventional narratives or dramas and turned to the exploration of his talents in themselves, employing them on memory, not on new experience. His new experience was not as fertile for him as was the past. The past is the real site of *Amarcord* and *The Clowns*—the best Fellini films after *8½*—of *Intervista* and *And the Ship Sails On* (1983). A yearning for the lost orderliness of the past is the dominant key of *Voices of the Moon*.

Out of these necessities and pressures came the new Fellini form, best described (as others have noted) by a literary term: the personal essay. Samuel Johnson said that doubtless the Lord could have invented a better fruit than the strawberry but doubtless also he never did. We might say, somewhat lower down the scale, that doubtless Fellini could have commissioned scripts of greater cogency but doubtless also he never did. He preferred to make films out of his talents themselves and his remembrance.

Fellini's career after *8½*, then, was plagued with the problems first raised in that film—the artist's difficulties of replenishment in our century, of transmuting the present into a usable past. Fellini's desperation for material can be instanced by his adaptations from literature, though he had often said he hated such adaptations: *Satyricon*, for example, and, the earlier "Toby Dammit," his contribution to the anthology film *Spirits of the Dead* (1968). Those films, like the subsequent *Casanova*, didn't do much more for me than display again Fellini's ability to select and guide superb designers and cinematographers. *Roma* and *City of Women* (1980) seemed a genius's currycombing of previously combed sources to make sure that he hadn't overlooked anything usable. *And the Ship Sails On* sparked some hope, which *Ginger and Fred* (1986) soon dimmed.

In discussions of Fellini, I must note, his views on women are recurrently examined. (Two weeks after his death *Le Monde* ran a cartoon set in Heaven. On a cloud in the lower left sits Fellini in a director's chair, megaphone in hand, a motion-picture camera next to him. In the air float starry-eyed, big-busted angels in low-cut gowns. In the upper left corner on another cloud, St. Peter is complaining to God: "Since he's been up here, it's been a madhouse.") It's worth mentioning that at least some feminist critics are far from antagonistic. A new anthology of recent criticism, *Perspectives on Federico Fellini* (1993), is helpful on this point. Co-edited by a prime Fellini expert, Peter Bondanella, with Cristina Degli-Esposti, it contains much of interest, including a section on "Fellini, Feminism, and the Image of Women in His Cinema."

Two of the four pieces in this section are on *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965). Teresa de Lauretis, after some thick terminological slogging, seems to find some aesthetic

and thematic utility in the film. In a much more enlightening essay, Marguerite Waller dissects several sequences in the film to show how carefully Fellini avoids those Hollywood patterns of composition and editing that treat women as voyeurs' prey. Waller contends that, in the very method of his film, he fights for women's selfhood, allowing us to see "that Hollywood's highly restricted, patriarchal rhetoric is not the natural extension of the human psyche it is sometimes claimed to be."

Gaetona Marrone's article on *City of Women* is more descriptive than analytical, yet is certainly not adversarial. But the surprise in the group is by the rampant feminist Germaine Greer. She had known Fellini somewhat, and in 1988 she was asked by a London magazine to interview him. Greer understands as much about Fellini's female characters as anyone, but this interview has no touch of opposition to his male-gazing; titled "Fellinissimo," it is a carol of adulation. (He asks her why she likes him, and she says something about his teeth and his hands. "He tries another tack. 'What don't you like about me?' 'The fact that you must die,' I say.")

Greer scrupulously includes every compliment that Fellini paid her on her various charms, and we can see that, more than mere egotism on her part, it is the record of a kind of seduction. She knows that, besides his respect for her intelligence, he is pelting her with petals of attentiveness and courtesy. Add to this his attractiveness as a man and his stature as an artist and add further that, after her return home, he telephoned to thank her for interviewing him, and we can see that he has, so to speak, been making a film with her: directing scenes. And she has collaborated.

I don't imply that a feminist as such is, or ought to be, impervious to male attention, but it's almost as if he had persuaded her to discard her militancy during their time together, to allow him to be his Italian-male self, in the most traditionally voluptuous diction. Finally it's not his triumph, it's hers, because she wrote the piece. But she makes it clear that, by his very being, he persuaded her to write it as it is.

What he did fundamentally with her was to perform. This is by no means to say that he was faking: it was part of the truth of his nature to perform. We all do it to some degree, as current psychologists and philosophers constantly remind us, but not all of us rejoice in it as Fellini did. Thus it's not quite accurate to say that he put himself into some of his films (*The Clowns*, *Intervista*, *Roma*): it's more apt to say that he couldn't keep himself out of them. That's why his death gave so many of us an added pang. We were not only losing the artist, we were losing the man.

I spent one day with Fellini, August 11, 1964, on the Roman location where he was shooting a scene of *Juliet of the Spirits*. I arrived early in the morning to find him in the middle of a large room, while members of the crew bustled around

him. He was sitting on a crate with a portable typewriter on another crate and was busily rewriting the scenes they were to shoot that day, so that they would benefit, he told me later, from his work on the film up to that point—what he had learned about the story, the characters, the actors, the cinematographer's concerns. (Thus does filmmaking become, in some hands, an existential act, a resolution of values in the heat of experience.)

The morning whirled by, as a short scene with Giulietta Masina and Valentina Cortese was shot and re-shot. (It was cut from the finished film.) Then a lot of us, including the two actresses, went to lunch with him—at the Rizzoli studios, because he liked the *polpettine* (meatballs) there. He and I talked a great deal during lunch (his English was adequate, my Italian inadequate), mostly about how difficult it was, in these days of deeper psychological understanding, to create credible villains in drama and film. After lunch we all snoozed in various places until the sun moved to the place where Fellini needed it.

But, in all that sparkling Fellini-centered day, something contradictory stood out. He insisted that I meet some of his collaborators. He introduced me to his editor, the other Mastroianni, Ruggero, who disliked any mention of his resemblance to his actor-brother. He told me how closely he worked with Fellini during the shooting of a film, even during its planning. Fellini brought along to lunch his masterly cinematographer, Gianni di Venanzo, but di Venanzo was shy, despite Fellini's asking "Giannino" to speak up.

At the end of the long, marvelous day, as Fellini and I shook hands, he asked, "Why you don't go to see the genius who helps me make my films whatever it is they are?" I asked who that was. "Piero Gherardi." Gherardi, the set and costume designer for *Juliet of the Spirits*, had also done the same flamboyant work for *The Nights of Cabiria*, *La Dolce Vita*, and *8½*. (I did try to see him, but he was out of Rome, and by the time I got back a few years later, he had died.) I said I thought he had meant the composer Nino Rota. Fellini threw up his hands and looked heavenward in gratitude.

All this emphasized what is true of every good director but has never been more true of any than of him. One of the signs of a director's talent is his ability to assemble colleagues who are both artists in their own right and seeming extensions of his temperament. It's impossible to think of several Fellini films without remembering Rota's music: it's as if Rota were Fellini in musical form. The clothes and hats and sets that Gherardi designed, the gradations of black and white that di Venanzo found, make us think, "Ah, Fellini!" Dante Ferretti's designs, crowding one after another, are the chief train of interest in *City of Women*. Tonino Delli Colli's lighting holds *Voices of the Moon* midway between reality and dream. These men worked on other directors' films, often beautifully,

but never better than they did with Fellini. Their contributions to his work, far from lessening our estimate of his genius, only amplify it. He knew how to extend, so to speak, his faculties.

One of the reasons that this essay is long is that I dread coming to the end of it. I don't want to, can't, won't "sum up" Fellini. I'll say just one thing. During his lifetime, many fine filmmakers blessed us with their art, but he was the only one who made us feel that each of his films, whatever its merits, was a present from a friend.



Postscript

“Some Notes on Film and the World,” 2007

(Salmagundi, Winter 2007)

In 1877 human life began to be extended. During the autumn of that year, Thomas Alva Edison started his experiments with the phonograph, which in a short time established that human voices need not be silenced by death. (Just one out of thousands of examples: I have heard Tolstoy speaking—in English.) Extension of life continued. Less than twenty years later, Edison, along with some European inventors, discovered how to photograph movement. Even in those days Edison intended that these pictures of motion should include sound, but it took another twenty-five years or so until his ambition was fulfilled—by others. Sound and motion became jointly preservable, and death was shoved further side.

* * *

Still photography had arrived in 1829, had sped around the world, and quickly became a treasure to millions. Among its many excitements was a basic revolutionary idea. Before the camera was invented, almost the only faces that were preserved were of people who could afford to have portraits painted or were so important that their faces had, through painting, to become part of history. Such qualifications no

longer applied. Now everyone's face—the grocer's, the grandmother's—could be preserved. The camera destroyed the social hierarchy of portraiture. Quite apart from politics—though Walter Benjamin noted that the camera came along at about the time that socialism bloomed—all faces were in a sense equal.

* * *

Yet, socially innovative though the photograph was, it was bound by the ancient conditions of image-making. Like the painting, the photo preserved; but, like the painting, it isolated its subject from time and continuance.

The motion-picture camera was free of those conditions; it did not need to divorce the image from life. And when the sound film arrived, the extension of life was, as far as was humanly imaginable, complete.

* * *

We live now among artists who long ago passed on. The other evening I saw a film called *The Citadel* (1938) and was touched by some of the scenes between Robert Donat and Rosalind Russell. While I watched, I remembered that I was being charmed by two actors who literally were now dust. Such experiences are now so common that most of us hardly note them or, at most, merely yearn for the past when the long-dead persons were alive. But this experience is more deep and affecting than, for instance, coming across an old letter or snapshot. *The Citadel* is one instance of an immense phenomenon. The technology of the last century has moved us into metaphysics. We are now frequently moved by dead artists. The fact that we don't often note this fact only demonstrates that this extension of life is now taken for granted. Though we may not consider it this way, we nonetheless view this extension as a natural property of our society.

* * *

The dead are more enjoyable than the aged. When we see a film made decades ago by someone who is still alive, we feel a bit sad. We wonder compassionately what he or she looks like now. But death is a liberator, free of wrinkles and disease. Death fits the person on screen. Death and that person seem kin. It takes a jab of the rational to keep from fancying that the dead person has sent us back a disembodied message.

* * *

With old films, we live in a way that no other art affords. We live chordal lives, simultaneously in the present and the past. Yes, we can now listen to past musical

performances, but, invaluable as the recordings are, the music is separated from the world in which those musicians lived. Films, however, with their ineluctable realism, with their implications and sometimes their revelations of the world in which they were made, bring us much of the context of the past in addition to their stories and acting. Robert Donat and Rosalind Russell inevitably bring us, along with what they are saying and doing, a flavor of 1938.

* * *

The term “art as history” has a slightly minatory effect, but the idea is inescapable with film. Costumes, diction musical taste, moral acceptances and rejections, all these and more are effectually presented to us by dead people who have declined to die. Often these presents are oblique; in some instances, they are boldly direct. When I was teaching film courses to theater students, I often included Howard Hawks’s film of *Twentieth Century* (1934) so that in John Barrymore’s performance they could see an acting style of the past in an actor who had mastered it and could lovingly satirize it.

Contrast this privilege with prior conditions. A well-known American actor of the early nineteenth century, James H. Hackett, tried to preserve in print some of the outstanding performances he had seen. In 1826 he attempted it with William Charles Macready’s Hamlet. For instance, Hackett discusses Hamlet’s line when he is informed that his father’s spirit has been seen. The prince says: “His beard was grizzled? No?” Hackett notes: “Mr. Macready, after ‘grizzled,’ allowed the witnesses not a moment for reflection but impatiently and rather comically, stammered “N’—n’—no?” Spoiled as we happily are by film, we can only pity Hackett struggling to fix the ephemeral moment.

The past suffers from lack of the future. This was always true, of course. (What if Napoleon had been equipped with a cell phone at Waterloo? What if Keats had been vaccinated?) Suppose that Macready had been filmed and recorded.

* * *

In addition to performing artists, world history also persists. The extended life of art is a boon; the extended life of everything else, absolutely everything else in human experience, is, though not so consistently pleasant, another boon. We can now be present when Babe Ruth points at the bleachers where he will then hit a homer; when Clark Gable speaks at the opening of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) in Atlanta, when Franklin Roosevelt tells Congress that “Yesterday, December 7th, 1941” is a day that will “live in infamy”; when Hitler barks death at millions; when Jack Ruby shoots Oswald; when innumerable Miss Americas accept their crowns.

Larger and lesser events of the past no longer recede and disappear; they only accept their chronological order.

To be accompanied today by the art of the past touches the mystical. But to be accompanied by the sheer facts of the past creates a continuing physicality, a sense of membership. The past was; we are; and now we know that some of us will always be. There is a certain happiness in escaping erasure.

* * *

A visitor from Mars—that ever-useful hypothetical being—arrives on earth, inspects, and reports home: The factor of time is a curious matter with this terrestrial species. Time passes, certainly, but not all of it. These creatures live in a curious temporal condition. Most of the present, as usual, continuously becomes the past; but some of it does not pass. It remains in the present. This is a contradiction of the cosmos. What effect will it have on the minds and imaginations of this species? Only time will tell.

Chronology of Stanley Jules Kauffmann

Born 24 April 1916 in New York City, the son of Joseph H. Kauffmann, a dentist, and Jeanette (Steiner) Kauffmann; one sibling, a sister, who pre-deceased him

Died 9 October 2013 in New York City

Educated in the public schools of New York City (including DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx) and at New York University (B.F.A. in drama, 1935)

Married 5 February 1943, to Laura (Cohen) Kauffmann (died in 2012); no children

Positions

Actor-Stage Manager, Washington Square Players, New York, 1931–1941

Writer, producer, and director of a weekly radio serial for the Mutual Broadcasting Company, 1945–1946

Associate Editor, Bantam Books, 1949–1952

Editor-in-Chief, Ballantine Books, 1952–1956

Consulting Editor, Ballantine Books, 1957–1958

Editor, Alfred A. Knopf, 1959–1960

Film Critic, *The New Republic*, 1958–1965, 1967–2013

Freelance Book Reviewer & Cultural Commentator, 1961–2013
 Drama Critic, WNET-TV, New York, 1963–1965
 Host, “The Art of Film,” WNET-TV, New York, 1963–1967
 Drama Critic, *The New York Times*, 1966
 Associate Literary Editor, *The New Republic*, 1966–1967
 Theater Critic, *The New Republic*, 1969–1979
 Professor of Drama, Yale University, 1967–1973, 1977–1986
 Distinguished Professor of English, York College, City University of New York, 1973–1976
 Visiting Professor of Drama, City University of New York Graduate Center, 1976–1992
 Theater Critic, *Saturday Review*, 1979–1985
 Distinguished Visiting Professor of Theater and Film, Adelphi University, 1992–1996
 Visiting Professor of Drama, Hunter College, City University of New York, 1993–2006

Awards and Distinctions

Emmy for “The Art of Film,” WNET-TV, New York, 1963–1964
 Honorary Fellow, Morse College, Yale University, 1964–2013
 Ford Foundation Fellow for Study Abroad, 1964 and 1971
 Member, National Society of Film Critics, 1966–1971
 Juror, National Book Awards, 1969, 1975
 George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism, 1972–1973
 Member, Theater Advisory Panel, National Endowment for the Arts, 1972–1976
 Member, Theater Advisory Panel, New York State Council on the Arts, 1977
 Rockefeller Fellow, 1978
 Guggenheim Fellow, 1979–1980
 George Polk Award for Film Criticism, 1982
 Edwin Booth Award for Significant Impact on Theater and Performance in New York, 1986
 Travel Grant from the Japan Foundation for Interest in and of Support of Japanese Films, 1986
 Birmingham Film Festival Prize for Lifetime Achievement, 1986
 Fellow, New York Institute for the Humanities, 1995
 Outstanding Teacher Award, Association for Theatre in Higher Education, 1995

Telluride Film Festival Award for Criticism, 1999

“Film Culture: Past and Present,” Symposium in Honor of Stanley Kauffmann, sponsored by the Center for the Humanities at the City University of New York Graduate Center, 2002

Featured in the documentary film *For the Love of Movies: The Story of American Film Criticism*, 2009

Bibliography of Stanley Jules Kauffmann

Non-Fiction

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American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to Citizen Kane (1972)

Living Images: Film Criticism and Comment (1975)

Persons of the Drama: Theater Criticism and Comment (1976)

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Regarding Film: Film Criticism and Comment (2001)

Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann (2003)

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About the Theater (2010)

Ten Great Films (2012)

Film Critic Talks: Interviews with Stanley Kauffmann, 1972–2012 (2013)

Fiction

The King of Proxy Street (1941; *The Bad Samaritan*, U.K.)

This Time Forever (1945)

The Hidden Hero (1949)

The Tightrope (1952; *The Philanderer*, U.K.)

A Change of Climate (1954; a.k.a. *A New Desire*)

Showdown Creek (1955, under the pseudonym Lucas Todd; filmed in 1957 as *Fury at Showdown*, starring John Derek)

Man of the World (1956; *The Very Man*, U.K.)

If It Be Love (1960)

Drama

The Red-Handkerchief Man (three acts, 1933)

The Mayor's Hose (one-act, 1934); *The Prince Who Shouldn't Have Shaved: A Frolic* (one-act, 1934)

How She Managed Her Marriage (one-act, 1935); *The Singer in Search of a King* (one-act, 1935);

The True Adventure (three acts, 1935)

Altogether Reformed (three acts, 1936); *Father Spills the Beans* (three acts, 1936); *A Million Stars* (one-act, 1936)

Cyrano of the Long Nose (one-act, 1937); *The Marooning of Marilla* (one-act, 1937); *A Word from the Wise, for Three Women* (1937); *Come Again: A South Seas Vignette* (one-act, 1937); *Coming of Age* (one-act, 1937); *Eleanor on the Hill: A Fantasia* (one-act, 1937); *His First Wife* (one-act, 1937)

The Cow Was in the Parlor (one-act, 1938); *Mr. Flemington Sits Down* (one-act, 1938); *Right under Her Nose* (one-act, 1938)

The More the Merrier (one-act, 1939); *Consider Lily* (1939)

Overhead (one-act, 1940); *Play Ball!* (1940); *Close Courting* (one-act, 1940); *The Salvation of Mr. Song* (one-act, 1940); *The Victors* (1940)

Bobino, His Adventures (two-act children's play, 1941)

The Bayfield Picture (one-act, 1942); *Pig of My Dreams* (one-act, 1942)

Cupid's Bow (one-act, 1943)

Food for Freedom (one-act children's play, 1944)

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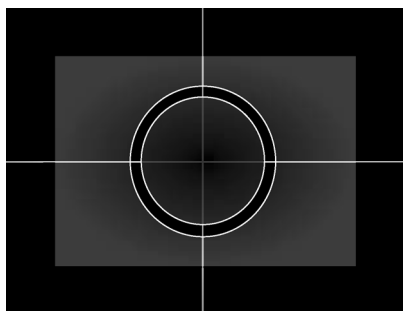
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